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JANE AUSTEN

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Novels by Beatrice Kean Seymour

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JANE AUSTEN

Study for a Portrait

by

BEATRICE KEAN SEYMOUR



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To my friend
JOHN GIDEON WILSON
with gratitude

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Author's Note

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This little book does not pretend to be an exhaustive study of Jane Austen and her work. It aims to do no more than present a point-of-view, to trace an outline which someone may care some day to fill in. It is, in fact, no more than it purports to be—a sketch, a study for a portrait as yet unpainted.

For the facts of Jane Austen's life I am indebted to the *Memoir* and to *Jane Austen : Her Life and Letters, A Family Record*, by William and Richard Arthur Austen-Leigh.

B. K. S.

Introductory

AS LONG AS I CAN REMEMBER I HAVE always been very sceptical of the authenticity of that familiar literary portrait of Jane Austen in which she is presented as a placid spinster who went nowhere, and whose most exciting adventure was being shown over the Prince Regent's Library at Carlton House. Moreover, I have never cared over-much for its expression. Here, we might judge, is a woman who missed nothing that went on around her, who to her needle-sharp observation added an acerbity of manner, a capacity for acid comment and a mind interested not at all in what people felt but only in what they looked like and in what they said. Her mind, indeed, was as restricted

as that keen observing glance, concerned only with the world of social intercourse and feminine fripperies and domesticities in which she moved. Never once did she lift her eyes to take a glance at the larger world beyond her gates to which, we are invited to believe, she maintained throughout her life a lofty detachment that had its roots in indifference. The woman who looks out at us from this portrait never had a genuine emotion in all her life, but must have found the emotions of other people immensely diverting.

It is, to say the least of it, a highly unlikely portrait.

Jane Austen, it has always seemed to me, possessed in high degree one quality not very frequent in mankind and seldom found as a concomitant to genius—the quality of reasonableness. And this reasonableness has been too readily interpreted as lack of emotion. I believe it was not her dislike of the exaggerated romance against which, as a mere girl, she had tilted so gay a lance, which made her dim her love-scenes; nor her own unemotional nature. I don't believe she was unemotional—only that she mistrusted emotion, and for that reason kept it clamped down. The

evidence that she was once in love has, on the whole, more to be said for it than against it, but she was not among those who are conquered by the tender passion, and, like all creative writers, she could sublimate her disappointments. Yet the signs are not wanting in her work that as she grew older she allowed her thoughts to wander back over the past—and so we get Anne Elliot, who had nursed her wounded love for eight years—and had Jane lived I believe we should have had more heroines of Anne's type. "Too good for me," said Jane, a little scared at what she had done. But how much of one side of Jane's nature, I wonder, was in Anne Elliot?

Far from being an Essential Spinster, lacking in emotion and with a set of opinions starched and ironed in perfect decorum, she had a tolerance of things and people almost modern in its sweep, despite the fact that she did not like people very much and loved but few. The Jane who wrote the novels is sometimes strikingly at variance with the Jane who wrote the Letters, as when in one of these she cheerfully salutes the fact that Lord Craven had taken a mistress, although in the novels she at all times maintains for the irregular union the greatest

disapproval. Yet it is undoubtedly true that the Jane who wrote the novels is in the Letters—and some little bit of the Jane who did not.

Jane's letters have been frowned upon by the scholars, who shrugged gowned shoulders over what they considered their triviality—a fate Cassandra could surely never have foreseen for them when, before her own death, she destroyed all the serious ones, and her own to Jane. The two sisters knew each other so well, understood each other's thoughts and attitudes and beliefs so intimately, that we should scarcely expect to find them exchanging views upon the world events which were taking place outside their garden walls. But we should find, all the same, I feel sure, had Cassandra not made it impossible, that many of Jane's letters made sufficient comment upon the affairs of the day to confirm my belief that she was a good deal more than a clever manipulator of the restricted social scene, that there were times when even her love of life paled a little at the thought of what man had made of man. The proof of this in the Letters which we have is not overwhelming, but in my view it is sufficient.

It is true that Jane Austen's novels are empty of

all echoes of momentous events, but what right have we to decide that because in her work her boundaries are her garden walls that she never looked over them? The artist's choice of subject is a thing to which he is entitled. And when Jane makes Elizabeth Bennet say that the more she sees of the world the more she is dissatisfied with it, why must it be assumed that she meant the little world of Longbourn? The truth is that Jane had a sense of proportion that was as amazing as anything about her, so that she got the emphasis in the right places, was not only possessed perennially of a pleasure in the "little" things of life but knew that they were also the important things.

I do not deny that Jane laughed at people. I do not deny that her laughter was sometimes a little unkind. But that is true of us all. "For what do we live," asks Mr. Bennet, "but to make sport for our neighbours, and laugh at them in our turn?" But Jane improved upon this philosophy by laughing at herself—a fact seldom accounted to her at all, much less for righteousness. For Jane knew that there were occasions when she was as absurd as the next person—which is again, surely, a saving grace not vouchsafed to us all? She laughed at women

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and at men, but at women the more—which is perhaps why men, as a sex, like her so much ; but she knew a lot of silly women, and a lot of silly women found their way, therefore, into her books and letters. It is true that when Jane had finished with them they look sillier than before, but that is no proof that she was a “cat” who disliked and despised her own sex. And when she laughs at silly people it is not, I am convinced, because she is superior and unkind, but because she found them absurd and because absurdity delighted her. The love of the absurd is the keynote of her work. Life to Jane Austen was delicious and preposterous. There was nothing to do but to laugh at it and make quiet under-statements concerning it that were like a sly dig in the ribs. “If she had chosen,” said G. K. Chesterton, “she could have been a Buffoon, a Wife of Bath.” Yet there are those who still confront us with the picture of that starched spinster!

“She was the sun of my life, the gilder of every pleasure, the soother of every sorrow,” wrote Cassandra after her death—and Cassandra knew her better than anyone else. Better than anyone else, too, Cassandra would know for a travesty that

portrait of the clever-looking spinster with watchful eyes and an unlovable expression. But would it, perhaps, have occurred to her that if she had left the Letters intact not a single line of it would ever have been drawn? Those which she did leave, she obviously preserved because she had enjoyed them and thought that others might enjoy them too—in which supposition she was right. They have enjoyed them too well. They have seized upon their gossipy flippancy and triviality and found in them a central unkindness and acerbity of spirit which saw in everything mere food for laughter. They are convinced that these Letters reveal the Essential Jane.

So they do. But it does not wear the face of this portrait. As I shall try to show.

Chapter One

NOTHING, PERHAPS, IS MORE PROBABLE than that if Jane Austen were alive to-day and writing her autobiography, she would begin by apologising, with the late G. K. Chesterton, for the fact that her family and background should appear "so disappointingly respectable and even reasonable, and deficient in all those unpleasant qualities that make a biography really popular." And nothing less probable than that Jane would ever have dreamed of writing her autobiography !

At this time of day it has become a commonplace to say that about her life there was nothing remarkable save that it was unremarkable. And with that, I think, Jane—the most reasonable of our geniuses

—would almost certainly have agreed. But would she also have granted that it was dull and uneventful, even if she had been able to forget the excitement and interest of writing the novels? I do not think so. It may be true that, like the happy nations, she had no history, that nothing very tragic or startling ever happened to her any more than it happened to the characters in her novels, but there is a good deal of evidence to show that Jane obtained from her short life a generous measure of enjoyment and amusement. Quiet it may have been, but it was unquestionably happy, and happier in nothing than in this—that it offers to the modern biographer no scope whatsoever for romantic theorisings or Freudian conjectures and conclusions. Nobody as yet has discovered for her a M. Héger for whom she cherished an illicit passion, nor deduced even the flimsiest evidence to show that the Rector of Steventon was a tyrant ruling his household with the rod of Calvinism or Evangelism. And although Jane's unyielding sharp awareness of human folly and idiosyncrasy is believed by some to be conditioned only by the fact that she was a spinster with a sharp tongue, nobody as yet has advanced the opinion that she was a soured and jilted one.

Even if it did not happen that Miss Mitford's second-hand report of the youthful Jane as "the prettiest, silliest and most affected husband-hunting butterfly," cannot possibly be seriously considered, it would prove but stony ground for the inquirer. For, like Jane's "romance" and the offer of marriage about which, the family record says, she changed her mind immediately, there is absolutely nothing to be made out of it—nothing that can possibly be erected upon the flimsy foundation it offers. Never did a more arid prospect offer itself to the biographer in search of a sensational theme, for Jane was not born, as she said of one of her own characters, "to be an heroine"; and so it comes about that she has escaped the common fate of the illustrious dead—she has not, in our ugly modern jargon, been "debunked." On the contrary, by most of her admirers she has been—very nearly—canonised, and I am not sure which of the two fates is the worse. One of them even waxes indignant at the suggestion that Jane was probably short-sighted, since she never describes the scenery! Yet she constantly laments her bad eyesight in her letters to Cassandra. "This complaint in my eye has been a sad bore to me,"

she says in January, 1799 (when she was barely twenty-three), "for I have not been able to read or work in any comfort since Friday"; and in the same year, "My eyes have been very indifferent, but are now getting better once more. I use them as little as I can, but *you* know, and *Elizabeth* knows, and everybody who ever had weak eyes knows, how delightful it is to hurt them by employment, against the advice and entreaty of one's friends!" But Jane's neglect of the scenery had nothing to do with her weak eyesight.

All the depreciatory criticism there is of Jane Austen comes (with, so far as I have been able to discover, but one exception) from outside the academic circles; but it is surprising how often, these days, it is encountered. Much of it finds her novels unreadable because they appear to be the product of a limited mind and restricted way of life; because they are concerned with "little things" while the big events of the world all around go totally unregarded. She was, we are told, so much a product of her own age that she took everything in it for granted, moved by no convictions, no righteous indignation, no social conscience. Throughout her life she remained

“supremely detached” from the “real” world of storm and stress, content, while Napoleon stormed across Europe, to write love-stories in which she derided the foibles of her acquaintances, and the lovers, as she expressly tells us, lived happy ever after. Jane, in short, was satisfied to fiddle while Rome burned. She left the world (or, to quote her one hostile academic critic, the parish) as she found it, and from her work you would never know that throughout her life the fate of nations hung in the balance.

It is true that Jane's work is limited in scope and intention, but is it also true that this fact should bear the interpretation put upon it? *Is* it true that she had nothing to say upon the ills and injustices of her day because she accepted all its standards, because she was indifferent to poverty, to abuses, and corruptions? Is it a fact that she sat writing her quiet novels without once lifting her eyes to survey the larger human scene, never catching so much as an echo of the gunfire that roared across Europe? Did she never wonder what was to be the result to humanity of so much shedding of blood? Did she believe that war, like so much else in her day, was no affair of woman's? *Was* her

“supreme detachment” but another name for indifference?

If you read only Jane's novels you might almost—but not quite—believe that, perhaps. But if you read the Letters as well it seems to me to be no longer possible to maintain these contentions with success, even allowing for the gaps for which their drastic overlooking by her sister Cassandra is responsible. Sir Leslie Stephen found them trivial, and academic opinion has largely followed him in that view, but the Letters, as I see them, are a key to Jane, both as a writer and as a woman.

What was the real Jane Austen actually like? The woman who looks out at us from the novels is incomplete, for Jane's work, though it could not be kept entirely free of her personality, prejudices, and ideas, is objective rather than subjective; but in the letters to her sister she is writing in the intimacy of a perfect friendship, sure of being understood, and “talks as fast as she can” about all the small things of her daily life that she tells us were to her “important” things. In these letters we have a great deal, I am sure, of the real woman, and but for Cassandra's destruction before her own death of all those which she considered too personal and

intimate for retention, the portrait enshrined in them would have more detail. But even as things are I believe that the Letters, taken in conjunction with the novels, will at least yield up a sketch from which a truer portrait of Jane, both as a human-being and as an artist, may be made than has hitherto been attempted.

There is nothing new to be discovered about Jane Austen. One hundred and twenty years after her death, her reticences and withdrawals—and Cassandra's sense of decency!—still wrap her round. But is it not possible that in some instances, at least; the wrong inferences have been drawn from acknowledged facts? Is it not possibly worth while to look at some of them from a fresh angle?

Chapter Two

I HAVE BEEN REPEATEDLY STRUCK BY the popular misconception of the dates which enshrine the short span of Jane Austen's life. Perhaps it is because none of her books was published until the nineteenth century that people think of her so often as an early Victorian writer, though she had been in her grave some twenty years before the young Victoria came to the throne. But there is, more probably, another and much better reason for this misconception. It is impossible to read Jane Austen's work without being constantly and startlingly aware of its extraordinary modernity—the result of her precise and pointed use of English which had nothing whatever in common with that used by her contemporaries, and across which her

lambent wit plays like summer lightning. Certainly, so far as style is concerned, she is no child of her ponderous-sounding age. If you could remove from her novels and letters certain period words and phrases, and all references to modes of travel and transport, they might belong to a much later period. Not only is this an explanation of the popular misconception as to her place in time, it sets her firmly among that small hierarchy who have written for eternity.

Nevertheless, difficult as it sometimes is to remember it, Jane Austen was born in the eighteenth century, and so near the end of it that all the influences which went to the shaping of her genius and personality were of that century alone. Born on December 16th, in the year 1775, she was the seventh of eight children and the younger of two girls to appear among the family of sons born to the Rev. George Austen, rector of Steventon, near Basingstoke, in the county of Hampshire. .

In this year Sheridan, at twenty-four, was producing *The Rivals* at Covent Garden. Crabbe, whom later Jane so much admired, was twenty-one and had already published his poem, *Inebriety*. Johnson was an old man. Fielding had been dead

some twenty years and Richardson fourteen. Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Scott were all little more than infants. Maria Edgeworth, another of Jane's favourites, had just been sent to school at Derby, and Mrs. Radcliffe, whom later Jane was both to enjoy and to laugh at, was a child of eleven. But Fanny Burney, at twenty-three, who had been writing in secret for some time past, must already have been engaged in sketching out the plot of *Evelina*. Sixteen years were to pass before Paine was to produce his *The Rights of Man* and seventeen before Mary Wollstonecraft published her *Vindication of The Rights of Woman*, but more than twenty years before Jane's appearance upon the earthly scene Lady Mary Wortley Montagu in her Letters¹ to her daughter had struck a vigorous blow for female education. There is no evidence, however, that Jane had ever read a line of any of the three.

In the world of affairs the battles of Lexington and Bunker's Hill had paved the way for the American Declaration of Independence and the American Colonies were as good as lost ; Captain Cook, not yet eaten by the Hawaii warriors, was voyaging for the second time on uncharted seas,

¹ Not published until 1763, but more completely in 1803, when Jane was twenty-seven.

while Warren Hastings had recently been made the first Governor-General of India, and in France events were already moving relentlessly towards the Revolution, which, with the Fall of the Bastille, was to begin when Jane was thirteen.

Some idea of the age in which she lived is to be gleaned from remembrance of the horrid fact that public executions at Tyburn did not cease until 1783—eight years after Jane's birth; and by the fact that people, as Jane and her family had good reason to realise, could be hanged for theft as late as the year 1800. The roads throughout England were uniformly bad, and in London filthy. An inefficient system of street lighting obtained until gas was introduced in 1811, the year of Jane's thirty-sixth birthday and the one in which she first attained the dignity of publication. Sloane Street was an outpost of London, and as it was several years too early for Sir Robert Peel's Metropolitan Police Force, a journey by night to such an outlying village as Chelsea was a dangerous adventure. The stage coach was the principal means of conveyance from place to place and in the towns the sedan chair still competed with the hackney coach. Jane records that a journey from Sloane Street to

Guildford took three and a quarter hours and from Guildford to Esher, a distance of some fourteen miles, two, and seems to think it good going. Some of her references to various journeys on family visits, both to Kent and to London, are amusing and instructive.

It wanted five minutes of twelve when we left Sittingbourne, from whence we had a famous pair of horses, which took us to Rochester in an hour and a quarter. Our next stage was not so expeditiously performed; the road was heavy and our horses very indifferent.

We had a very good journey (to town), weather and roads excellent. Our only misfortune being delayed about a quarter of an hour at Kingston for horses and being obliged to put up with a pair belonging to a hackney coach and their driver, which left no room on the barouche box for Lizzie, and consequently we were four within, which was a little crowded.

We changed horses at the end of every stage, and paid at almost every turnpike. We had a very neat chaise from Devizes; it looked almost as well as a gentleman's, at least, as a very shabby gentleman's. In spite of this, however, we were

above three hours coming from thence to Paragon.

We were late in London, from being a great load and from changing coaches at Farnham, it was nearly four I believe when we reached Sloane Street and Henry himself met me, and as soon as my Trunk and Basket could be routed out from all the other Trunks and Baskets in the world, we were on our way to Hans Place in the Luxury of a nice large cool dirty Hackney Coach.

It was in this remote, leisurely, and not very comfortable world that the young Jane grew up. She was born late enough to miss the harsh system of child-training which was in vogue at the earlier part of the century, but if we may judge from her references to her young nieces and nephews in later years her childhood was not without discipline. As babies all the Austen children were "farmed out" in the village for several years, a strange and rather barbarous custom to modern ideas to which the Austen parents apparently subscribed. The sisters went to school at so tender an age, at least as far as Jane is concerned, that it has been suggested¹ she was sent not from any idea of her profiting by instruction but rather as a companion for Cassandra¹

¹ W. and R. A. Austen-Leigh. (*Jane Austen: Her Life and Letters, A Family Record.*) Hereinafter referred to as *Family Record*.

since the two were inseparable—a fact which Mrs. Austen recognised by a comment which would seem to indicate that it was from her that Jane inherited some part at least of her gift for precise and telling statement—"If Cassandra were going to have her head cut off, Jane would insist on sharing her fate."¹ Save that Jane, on one of her absences from home, nearly died of fever, that her schooling ended at almost as tender an age as it began, and that most of her education was obtained at the hands of her elder brothers, there is nothing to say about Jane's childhood. At the time of the publication of *Emma* she described herself in a letter to the Librarian of Carlton House, as "the most unlearned and uninformed female who ever dared to be an authoress," and avers that she knew only "her own mother-tongue," and had "read little in that." But we are told that she knew "a good deal of French and a little Italian,"² and her association with her cousin, Eliza Hancock, who had been educated in France and became the wife of the Comte de Feuillide, would most probably be responsible for the former. One can never be quite

¹ *Family Record*.

² Lord Brabourne's edition of *The Letters*, page 349.

sure that some of Jane's statements about herself and members of her family are to be taken seriously. An imp of mischief frequently directed her pen, so that she inverts her facts, to the confusion of posterity—as when she announces (in a letter to the absent Cassandra) her brother Frank's appointment to *The Triton*. But this question of Jane's reading is one which has been raised by those anxious to prove (a) that she was well read in the classic authors, and (b) that she was not. Yet her novels and letters are full of allusions to books and their authors and obviously reflect her own reading and preferences. It is clear that she had read her Richardson, and as a novelist owed something to him; of Fielding she knew at least *Tom Jones*. She admired Johnson and called him her "dear Dr. Johnson," though nothing could be more unlike his pompous style of writing than her own. Her admiration for Crabbe is more than once expressed in her Letters. I do not recall any reference to Wordsworth and Coleridge, although the appearance in 1798 of *Lyrical Ballads*, with their authors' avowed intention of moving away from the formality of the eighteenth century to the simplicity of ordinary people and more natural phrasing, might

have been expected to touch some chord in Jane. Crabbe was the nearest approach among her enthusiasms to the poetic return to the simplicities, though I remember that somebody in the unfinished *Sanditon* is permitted to admire Wordsworth. She certainly read Southey and was annoyed by his "anti-English" bias in *Letters from England*,¹ though whether, with Byron, she found him as a poet "so quaint and mouthy" is not recorded. She read and admired Scott, both as poet and (against her declared intention) as a novelist, and I fancy that although she does not seem much to have liked *Marmion*, she read with avidity the four "Waverleys" which appeared in her lifetime.² But if her letters are full of allusions to her own reading of contemporary authors, in her novels it is not only that her characters read books by past and contemporary authors, they discuss them—and, further, their choice in books is made a subtle factor in their characterisation. Marianne Dashwood liked

¹ She says, "The man describes well, but is horribly anti-English. He deserves to be the foreigner he assumes." Did she know his identity? The letters were supposed to be written by a fictitious Spanish traveller, Don Manuel Alvarez Espriella. (*Family Record*, page 221).

² The secret of Scott's identity as the author of *Waverley* was "out" by 1814.

Cowper and Crabbe; so did Willoughby, who also esteemed Pope "no more than is proper." Catherine Morland "talked novels" with John Thorpe, who despised them. The *Quarterly* was taken at Mansfield Park, and during her sojourn in her own poor home in Portsmouth Fanny Price sighed for the books she had left behind there and joined a circulating library. She hoped to inspire in her sister "a taste for the biography and poetry she delighted in herself," and comparing her father's house with Mansfield Park, she is tempted to "apply to them Dr. Johnson's celebrated judgment as to matrimony and celibacy, and say that though Mansfield Park might have some pains, Portsmouth could have no pleasures," whilst "her longings to be back were such as to bring a line or two of Cowper's *Tirocinium* for ever before her—'with what intense desire she wants her home,' which was continually on her tongue."

Even Jane's working farmer, Robert Martin, is permitted to have read the *Vicar of Wakefield* and to show a becoming interest in other works mentioned to him by Harriet Smith, but Emma, who had supposed him to be "not a man of information beyond the line of his own business—he does not

read?" merely drew up lists of excellent books which she lacked the industry and patience to read. Jane, who came from a family of great readers (and readers, too, of novels, as she is particular to tell us), obviously felt that books were so much a part of life that she could not imagine people existing without them, and it is noteworthy that the characters she does not approve of in her novels either do not read or else speak slightly of what they do read, or, as with John Thorpe, of what they do not. But in any case, what does it matter whether Jane was "well-read" or not? Erudition has spoilt many a budding novelist.

When did Jane begin to write? The only authoritative answer to this interesting question is the family statement that by the time she was sixteen she had filled several notebooks with her efforts, and that *Love and Freindship*, so significant because it showed the trend of her writing gift, was written when she was seventeen. *Pride and Prejudice* (at least in its first form, *First (or) False Impressions*) and *Sense and Sensibility* (of which *Elinor and Marianne*, written earlier in the form of letters, is usually considered the genesis) before she was twenty-one, whilst *Northanger Abbey* (*Susan*)

was finished in her twenty-third year, but revised at Bath. There seems no doubt that Jane wrote for that most excellent of all reasons—because she *had* to write; and for her own family circle, to whom the manuscripts were read. But *First Impressions* was offered in November, 1797, to a publisher, Cadell, who promptly refused it. It must be said, however, that he did not see the manuscript but was offered a sight of it by Jane's father, who recommended it to his consideration as "about the length of *Evelina*." The popularity of that work had doubtless brought publishers many manuscripts of this kind and Cadell probably had good reason for not wanting to see another.

Those early years of Jane's were busy ones, not alone because of the novel-writing. Her mother, of whose indifferent health we get reports in the earliest of the Letters extant, delegated to the young girl a good deal of the housekeeping in her sister Cassandra's frequent absences from home on visits to her brother Edward and his family at Rowling, and afterwards at his Kentish estate at Godmersham. In November, 1798, we find her writing to Cassandra, "My Mother desires me to tell you that I am a very good housekeeper, which I have no

reluctance in doing, because I really think it my peculiar excellence, and for this reason—I always take care to provide such things as please my own appetite, which I consider the chief merit in house-keeping.” And again, “I am very fond of experimental housekeeping, such as having an ox-cheek now and then; I shall have one next week, and I mean to have some little dumplings put into it, that I may fancy myself at Godmersham.” But in addition to writing and housekeeping she was obviously a very normal young woman, who indulged in the usual diversions of her sex and age. She bought new clothes and regretted accidents to those in use. “My new coloured gown is very much washed out,” she laments to Cassandra, “though I charged everybody to take good care of it,” and adds a truly Jane-ish comment, “I hope yours is too!” She flirted and danced and amused herself in the traditional manner of young women. “I danced twice with Warren last night and once with Mr. Charles Watkins,” she reports to Cassandra, “and to my inexpressible astonishment, I entirely escaped John Lyford. I was forced to fight for it, however. We had a very good supper, and the greenhouse

was illuminated in a very elegant manner.” Again, “We dined at Goodnestone and in the Evening danced two Country Dances and the Boulangeries. I opened the Ball with Edw^d. Bridges . . . We supped there and walked home under the shade of two umbrellas.” Another letter says, “We have been very gay since I wrote last, dining at Nackington and returning by moonlight, and everything quite in Stile, not to mention Mr. Claringbould’s funeral, which we saw go by on Sunday.”

We hear, too, of her flirtation with a certain Tom Lefroy, the nephew of her friend, Mrs. Lefroy. She was barely twenty and, as we know, already deeply engaged with her writing. In January, 1796, she writes to Cassandra, “I mean to confine myself in future to Mr. Tom Lefroy, for whom I don’t care sixpence.” She says that he was an admirer of *Tom Jones* and that his morning coat was a great deal too light. Whatever there was in the affair it came to nothing for in the same month she writes, “At length the day is come on which I am to flirt my last with Tom Lefroy, and when you receive this it will all be over. My tears flow as I write at the melancholy idea. . . . There is a report that Tom is going to be married to a Lichfield lass.” Two

years later is there, perhaps, a note of something a little wistful in her recording of another visit from her friend Mrs. Lefroy, when "she did not mention his name to me, and I was too proud to make any inquiries." It was her father who elicited the information that he was on his way to Ireland, where he is "called to the Bar and means to practice." It has been placed on record that in later life, this young man, who became Lord Chief Justice of Ireland, admitted that as a boy he had been in love with Jane; but her letters do not indicate that the affair was ever to her anything more than a pleasant interlude, like that other to which she refers in the autumn of the year of Lefroy's departure. "We went by Bifrons,¹ and I contemplated, with a melancholy pleasure, the abode of Him on whom I once so fondly doated."

In addition to all these things Jane too went visiting. Her stays at Rowling and at Godmersham alternate with visits to the Leigh-Perrots, the aunt and uncle who were often in Bath. Here she was also sometimes to be found in the company of the Edward Austens, for Edward had "everything else

¹ Bifrons, so Lord Brabourne tells us, was in the possession at that time of a family named Taylor, but he has no clue to the individual to whom Jane refers.

in the world he could wish for but Good Health," and suffered from gout. "He drinks at the Hetling Pump to-morrow," Jane informs Cassandra, "is to bathe to-morrow, and try Electricity on Tuesday:—he proposed the latter himself to Dr. Fellowes, who made no objection to it, but I fancy we are all unanimous in expecting no advantage from it."¹ She does her duty to the parish of Steventon as the rector's daughter and reports that she has given "a pair of worsted stockings to Mary Hutchins, Dame Kew, Mary Steevens, and Dame Staples; a shift to Hannah Staples, and a shawl to Betty Dawkins: amounting in all to one guinea." But perhaps the charity visits were apt to become a little spasmodic, for during one of Cassandra's absences she writes that a certain Betty Londes inquired particularly after her, and said she missed her very much because she "used to call in upon her very often." "This," said Jane, "was an oblique reproach at me, which I am sorry to have merited, and from which I shall profit."

In 1801 Jane's father retired from his living at Steventon, leaving his eldest son James in charge, and moved with his family to Bath. It is said that

¹ The comment is worth quoting in these days when so much faith is placed in electricity by sufferers from Edward's complaint.

the abrupt announcement that she was to leave her home came as a great shock to Jane, and that she reacted to it as later she makes Marianne Dashwood react upon leaving Norland, by fainting away. One is perhaps a little sceptical of the display of this kind of "sensibility" in Jane and unfortunately there are no letters in existence for the month following the announcement, although the family records show that Cassandra was away at Godmersham for the whole of that period. By January, however, she is writing : " I get more and more reconciled to the idea of our removal. We have lived long enough in this neighbourhood ; the Basingstoke balls are certainly on the decline, there is something interesting in the bustle of going away, and the prospect of spending future summers by the sea or in Wales is very delightful." Lord Brabourne says that the removal " does not seem to have caused her as much regret as one would have expected." But the word " reconciled " is as significant as is the gap in the Letters. There is significance, too, in the fact that during the five years of her stay at Bath her literary activities, apart from the finishing and revision of *Northanger Abbey* (then called *Susan*), were limited to the

writing of the unfinished *The Watsons*. Whether this was really because in the town Jane lacked the atmosphere most necessary for the flowering of her talent, or whether the failure to get either of her earlier books accepted for publication had temporarily quenched her passion for writing, cannot ever be known. From Jane's letters it at least does not look as if her social distractions were so exciting as to crowd out more serious concerns, for she writes: "It was rather a dull affair . . . after tea we cheered up"; "Another stupid party last night; perhaps if larger they might be less intolerable"—only I think Jane did not find them so "intolerable," for that power of observation of hers was at work all the time. "I cannot, anyhow," she goes on, "continue to find people agreeable; I respect Mrs. Chamberlayne for doing her hair well, but cannot feel more than a tender sentiment." Her comments are caustic, as if Jane were very bored and had to amuse herself at all costs. She finds a certain Miss Langley "like any other girl, with a broad nose and wide mouth, fashionable dress and exposed bosom"; and of another she says, "Her face has the same defect of baldness as her sister's and her features not so handsome; she

was highly rouged, and looked rather quietly and contentedly silly, than anything else." Beyond doubt, I think, it was Miss Mitford's "poker of whom everyone is afraid" who went to the Bath festivities! And discouragement, rather than any other, the factor which accounts both for Jane's creative sterility at Bath and for the almost certain period of idleness which followed her father's death and the family removal to Southampton (from which Jane is writing in January, 1807) for in no letter of this Southampton period do we find any reference to further literary work. We know, however, that while at Bath she had sold a novel for the modest sum of ten pounds, to Crosby of London, but although "intended for immediate publication" the book did not appear, for in 1809 we hear of Jane still trying to get it published. Crosby refused, alleging that no time was stipulated for its publication, and that should Jane or anyone else attempt to bring it out, Messrs. Crosby & Co. would take proceedings to stop the sale. That this novel was *Northanger Abbey* would seem to be proved by the Prefatory Note¹ which Jane wrote for that book

¹ "This little work was finished in the year 1803 and intended for immediate publication. It was disposed of to a bookseller, it was even advertised, and why the business proceeded no further the author has never been able to learn."

when she was preparing it for the Press in 1816, though once again there was a hitch and it did not attain the dignity of print until after her death. The indifference of the publisher to this work, taken in conjunction with her earlier failures to secure publication, must have been a severe blow to Jane's *amour propre* as a writer and quite sufficient to account for the gap in her creative output.

Nevertheless, attempts have, of course, been made to show that at this period of her life Jane had her mind turned in other directions—that “romance” and marriage and not novel-writing held it in thrall. Yet who that has followed the events of those years which saw the publication of her novels can believe that her writing was not at all times a serious business with her? The story of an offer of marriage from an old friend, accepted and then almost immediately retracted, is now familiar, but as the evidence of its authenticity does not seem very overwhelming the interest of the incident resides in the confirmation it affords, supposing it to be true, of our opinion of Jane's temperament and sterling worth. As to the equally familiar story of the “romance in the West,” this comes from a recollection of Jane's niece, Caroline,

committed to paper long years after the event. She places the incident, which was "supported by the unimpeachable authority of Cassandra," in or about the year 1799 or 1800; but Lord Brabourne tells us that he has not been able to discover any evidence supporting it. This, too, therefore, would appear to have no significance for us to-day were it not for a passage in one of Jane's later letters which has never, it seems to me, been satisfactorily explained. Jane is staying at Godmersham in 1808 and is being pressed to stay on into September (it is June when she writes), and she says that she had "felt obliged" to give her brother and his wife "one private reason for wishing to be at home in July."

"They feel the strength of it, and say no more, and one can rely on their secrecy. After this, I hope we shall not be disappointed of our friend's visit; my honour as well as my affection will be concerned in it."

Lord Brabourne says he has no clue to this "secret," but Mr. R. W. Chapman in his *Notes on the Letters* makes short work of it by referring it to a previous letter (Monday, June 20th) in

which she says: "I hope, by this early return, I am sure of seeing Catherine and Alethea—and I propose that with or without them you and I and Martha shall have a snug fortnight while my Mother is at Steventon." But he adds: "Why *secrecy* was needed does not appear," and he gives the word "friends" in the plural, whereas in the Brabourne edition it appears in the singular. The language—"my honour as well as my affection is bound up in it"—is quite unusually solemn for Jane, used in connection with her doings and plans, and it may be that "the romance" really belonged to this period, while the Austens are still at Southampton, rather than to that "about 1799 or 1800" in which Caroline Austen placed it.

But whatever the truth of all this may be, one thing I do not believe—and that is that Jane Austen was the cold, unemotional creature so many would have us believe her to have been. All the evidence there is would seem to point in the opposite direction. Whatever unhappiness or disappointments may have come her way, she did not take the world into her confidence—she did not make a story of them. And if ever she talked to Cassandra about the abortive affair of the heart with which she is

credited, that staunch ally took good care that the world should not know what Jane had intended it should not know. But no cold, unemotional woman ever wrote *Persuasion*, ever drew Anne Elliot or made her say: "Your feelings may be the strongest, but ours are the most tender. . . . All the privilege I claim for my own sex (it is not a very enviable one, you need not covet it) is that of loving longest, when existence or when hope is gone." And surely no woman who was incapable of emotion ever wrote those letters to her young niece, Fanny Knight, who took her youthful problems to her aunt. Some of Jane's pronouncements upon her niece's states of mind are very revealing of the wise and very human Jane who lived beneath all that humorous detachment.

Oh, dear Fanny! Your mistake has been one that thousands of women fall into. He was the *first* young man who attached himself to you. That was the charm, and most powerful it is. Among the multitudes, however, that make the same mistake with yourself, there can be few indeed who have so little reason to regret it; *his* character and *his* attachment leave you nothing to be ashamed of. Why should you be

living in dread of his marrying somebody else ? (Yet how natural !) You did not choose to have him yourself, why not allow him to take comfort where he can ? My dearest Fanny, I cannot bear you should be unhappy about him !

When I consider how few young men you have yet seen much of ; how capable you are (yes, I do still think you *very* capable) of being really in love ; and how full of temptation the next six or seven years of your life will probably be (it is the very period of life for the strongest attachments to be formed)—I cannot wish you, with your present very cool feelings, to devote yourself in honour to him. It is very true that you never may attach another man his equal altogether : but if that other man has the power of attaching you *more*, he will be in your eyes the most perfect. . . . Nothing can be compared to the misery of being bound *without* love—bound to one, and preferring another ; *that* is a punishment which you do not deserve.¹

Certainly it was no “ Essential Spinster ” who gave this advice to the young girl in love with love !—nor would the youthful Fanny have poured

¹ Brabourne, Vol. II.

herself out on such a subject to that kind of Aunt. But Jane's eternal sense of values and of proportion led her to keep even so unruly a thing as love in its proper place. There is something, perhaps, in Emma Woodhouse's attitude to love that is Jane's also. "I am quite enough in love. I should be sorry to be more. . . . Every consideration of the subject, in short, makes me thankful that my happiness is not more deeply involved." Jane was a little distrustful of this disturber of the peace, but I do not believe that she was incapable of falling in love, only that she would not fall in head foremost. Love, for Jane, would be cool-rooted, like Keats's flowers.

Whatever the secret of that unfertile period at Southampton—whether disappointment over her work or over some affair of the heart—it came to an end, and in the spring of 1809 she is making an attempt to secure from Crosby the manuscript she had sold to him six years before. It was unsuccessful, but a little later in the year we find Jane hard at work upon her fourth novel, *Mansfield Park*. The family was now at Chawton, near Alton, in a cottage belonging to her brother Edward's estate, and not very far from the old home at Steventon.

Jane, I think, was only really happy in the country—certainly her talent fructified in its peace and quiet. She had no more than eight years of life left to her, but they were years crammed with happiness, literary fulfilment, and a measure of contemporary recognition. If there had ever been an affair of the heart which left a legacy of pain and loss behind it, there can be little doubt that it was sublimated and translated into the lives and feelings of the people of her creative mind who, quite as much as those of the actual world, were her friends and companions.

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Chapter Three

JANE WAS NEARLY THIRTY-SIX WHEN AT last, in 1811, fifteen years after it was written and only six before her death, she achieved publication with *Sense and Sensibility*—the third of her novels to be offered to a publisher. We do not know very much about the circumstances which attended this exciting event, save that the name of the publisher concerned was Egerton and that when she went to town in the April to stay with her brother Henry, who acted as her agent, the manuscript was already in the printer's hands, for she writes on the 25th to Cassandra that she is "never too busy to think of *Sense and Sensibility*. I can no more forget it than a mother can forget her

suckling child," but that she had "scarcely a hope of its being out in June," though Henry "has hurried the printer."

She was right, for it did not appear until the October. Its title-pages bore the words: "By a Lady," and in September Cassandra had written to Godmersham begging the Edward-Austens not to mention that Jane was the author.¹ It would appear to have been brought out at the author's risk, as we are told that Jane put aside a sum against possible losses, but in July, 1813, she is writing to her brother Frank, then in command of the *Elephant*, stationed in the Baltic, that every copy has been sold and that it had brought her £140, "besides the copyright."

The book was favourably received and she must have returned with eagerness to the revision of *Pride and Prejudice*, which was presently also offered to Egerton, who this time had the courage to buy the manuscript outright for the sum, apparently, of £110, since Jane continues in the same letter: "I have now written myself into £250, which only makes me long for more."

This novel—"her own darling child"—came

¹ Entry in Fanny Knight's Diary (Brabourne).

out in January, 1813. It went into a second edition in September, and so, too, did *Sense and Sensibility*. In her brother's house during this period there was "a constant succession of small events, somebody is always going or coming"; nevertheless, *Mansfield Park*, "the something in hand" which she hoped "the credit of *Pride and Prejudice* will sell well, though not half so entertaining," had been completed in the summer and when it appeared in the following spring, *Emma* was already begun.

By this time, too, the secret of her authorship, at least in the circle of her acquaintance, had begun to leak out. Henry, "in the warmth of his brotherly vanity," had forgotten to be discreet, and Jane is trying to "harden" herself to the fearful joy of her position. There is no doubt, all the same, that she enjoyed these visits to her brother, with their dinner-parties, "sweet flattery," and, presently, Henry's enthusiasm over *Mansfield Park*, which he was reading (one assumes in manuscript) and liking "better and better." She was taken to the picture galleries and to Drury Lane to see Kean, with whom she expresses herself as "well satisfied," and Henry finishes reading *Mansfield Park* and "his enthusiasm has not lessened." On March 9th, 1814, Jane

is evidently in high spirits. She sends "her love to all and cares for nobody"; but she goes on working at *Emma*.

Mansfield Park, the first work of Jane's maturity, appeared in the May, and the first edition (a small one, as we learn) was sold out in six months. In early November she is writing from Chawton that a second edition has been suggested by her publisher, but the matter is still undecided at the end of the month, and there is, in fact, no second edition until 1816—and by that time Jane has changed her publisher and *Emma* has made its bow.

The publication of *Emma* was held up by Henry's illness, and there seems also to have been some delay in the settlement of the terms upon which Murray,¹ the publisher to whom Jane had now transferred her interests, was to acquire the copyrights of *Emma* and earlier books; but in November Jane's patience is ebbing and we find her making an effort to hurry things forward. "Is it likely," she writes to Murray, "that the printers will be influenced by knowing that the work is to be dedicated, by permission, to the Prince Regent?"

¹ "He is a rogue, of course, but a civil one." (Jane to Cassandra, October 17th, 1815.)

If you can make that circumstance operate, I shall be glad." Apparently Mr. Murray could, for on the next day, writing to Cassandra, Jane says that she is able to give a much better account of her affairs—the printer had apologised and Mr. Murray is so "very polite" that "it is quite overcoming. . . . In short, I am soothed and complimented into tolerable comfort."

It was not to continue. In the following March the pleasure she derived at being noticed by the *Quarterly*, must have been considerably dashed by the failure of the banking-house in which Henry was a partner, and by his own subsequent bankruptcy. Jane herself was only a small loser through the crash, though other members of her family were less fortunate, and Henry himself, at forty-five, began life all over again by entering the Church, to become "an earnest preacher of the evangelical school." Henry Austen seems to have been one of those mercurial human beings upon whom trouble sits but lightly. He had not, Jane said of him upon the death in 1813 of his wife (who had been Eliza Hancock de Feuillide), "a mind for affliction; he is too busy, too active, too sanguine," and in the midst of his financial crisis he seems to have found time

to recover for Jane the manuscript she had sold as long ago as 1803 to Crosby and which she herself had failed to recover in 1809. It must have given him great pleasure, as a man of business, to inform the reluctant publisher that the despised and neglected work was by the author of the now well-known *Pride and Prejudice*.¹

Meantime, Jane was working on *Persuasion*, begun in the previous autumn but doubtless interrupted by the troublesome events of the spring of 1816. She paid some visits with Cassandra to friends at Kintbury, who recorded the change they noticed in her health and spirits. But *Persuasion* was finished in the July and a month later she re-wrote a chapter at the end. In the December she is writing with her accustomed vigour to her nephew Edward, who had just left Winchester, about his "strong, manly, spirited sketches, full of variety and glow," and about her own "little bit (two inches wide) of ivory on which I work with so fine a brush, as produces little effect after much labour." In the New Year, 1817, she began work on a fresh novel, but by March had relinquished it. Her writing in this world was at an end. She made

¹ *Memoir*, p. 129.

her will, went with Cassandra to Winchester and recovered a little. But in June her brother James writes to his son that there was no hope of having "your dear valuable Aunt Jane restored to us." The physician at Winchester had "candidly told" them that her case was desperate. She died on July 18th, five months short of her forty-second birthday, and was buried in Winchester Cathedral.

The nature of Jane's malady is something of a mystery. It is vaguely spoken of as a "decline," but the word seems oddly incongruous applied to so robust a personality. More definitely we are told by some of her biographers that Jane was consumptive, but the Austens do not seem to have been a consumptive family, if we may judge from Jane's own comment that Edward "has a bad cough for an Austen," and it is not very usual to develop consumption at the age of forty-one. Jane's references to her own symptoms suggest to some of us who have had to watch them in those dear to us, yet another dread complaint no more curable now than it was in Jane's day. But whatever her disease, death was a cruel interruption to a career little more than established. Recognition she had in her lifetime, but she missed contemporary fame, and

maybe would have been embarrassed by it had she lived to know it.

It is the final irony in a life pointed with irony that she, who had so loved to laugh, who had enjoyed the pageant of life and watched it with so sharply observant and appreciative an eye, should say at the last that she wanted of it "nothing but death."

She was buried in Winchester Cathedral. There is a tablet to her memory, and it is said that a verger of the cathedral once asked a visitor if he could tell him whether there was "anything particular about that lady; so many people want to know where she was buried." Walking in her Elysian Fields I think Jane, hearing that, must have found one other thing to laugh at in the world which had amused her so often.

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Chapter Four

PUBLISHERS, SO FAR AS JANE'S EARLY work is concerned, do not make a very impressive appearance, and but for them Jane might very well have produced in her short life twice as many novels as she did. It seems strange to us to-day that such a book as *Pride and Prejudice* should have had to wait fifteen years for a publisher, but Jane's father must be saddled, perhaps, with some share of the responsibility, since to tell a publisher no more than that a manuscript was "about the length" of a "best-seller" was hardly the means most likely to arouse his interest. *Evelina* had appeared in 1778, when Jane was little more than a baby, but it must have had many imitators. It is possible,

of course, that *First Impressions*, the initial form of *Pride and Prejudice*, was far inferior to the brilliant book we know to-day, and an attempt has been made to show that it was re-written as late as 1811 and 1812—that is, after the publication of *Sense and Sensibility*, but one of Jane's most sympathetic critics¹ considers the "proof" not as conclusive as the investigators believe. In any case, Jane's father, a man of culture and judgment, and a novel reader, like the rest of the family, had a good opinion of the book, and had he actually sent the manuscript to Cadell, the result might have been very different. It is certainly difficult to believe that any publisher could have resisted that first sentence, for, speaking as a novelist, I assert that first sentences in a novel are usually permanent, whatever else suffers a sea change upon revision. Jane had a singular and enviable gift for beginnings. All her novels start with sentences as arresting as a pistol shot, and that of *Pride and Prejudice* is probably the best of them. *It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.*

Yet *Susan* (which became *Northanger Abbey*)

¹ Mr. J. C. Bailey.

started with a sentence equally lively and promising—*No one who had ever seen Catherine Morland in her infancy would have supposed her born to be an heroine.* Crosby, the publisher here concerned, did see the manuscript and yet, though he bought it and seems actually to have announced its immediate appearance, never made any attempt to produce it, and later relinquished it for the same absurd sum as that for which he purchased it. But for Crosby's pusillanimity there is, I think, a certain measure of excuse. In the first place, it would have been obvious to him that part at least of the design of *Susan* was a desire to make fun of a type of fiction then widely popular—not alone Mrs. Radcliffe's well-known *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, which had appeared nine years earlier and enjoyed a tremendous vogue, but the whole school of Gothic romance to which that story belonged. The complete list of novels which Isabella Thorpe recommends to Catherine Morland as "all horrid" must have been familiar to Crosby in 1803, since at least four of them had appeared as recently as 1798, and the author of one of them (*Orphan of the Rhine*)¹ had followed her success by another (*The Mysteries of*

¹ Discovered in 1927 to be Mrs. Eleanor Sleath.

the Forest) as recently as 1802. Perhaps, even though he lived before the felicity of the English Libel laws, the publisher had his doubts about the success of a book which "debunked" anything so widely accepted and enjoyed. Sheridan had had a cut at the same kind of thing as far back as the year of Jane's birth, when *The Rivals* was produced at Covent Garden,¹ but the stage was a different matter, and in any case Sheridan's satire was aimed at Lydia's mental laziness and personal taste far more than at the particular brand of fiction which she liked quite as much as her maid. But Jane was much less haphazard than Sheridan in her choice² of titles, and there could be no doubt whatever of her intentions. Besides which, the book, obviously from a youthful as well as a lively pen, was definitely topical. If it was to be published at all it ought to have been published at once and Crosby, unable to make up his mind, must have realised that the longer he kept it the less chance it had of being a success if he ever decided to bring it out.

There is another factor which must have weighed with Crosby quite as much if not more than these

¹ Unsuccessfully, until revised.

² Mr. Michael Sadleir, in *The Northanger Novels*, says that Jane's seven titles fairly represent the two chief tendencies of the prevailing fashion.

things. If Cadell's attitude to the proffered *First Impressions* was conceivably dictated by the thought that somebody was probably offering him something imitative of a recently popular work, the exact opposite must surely have occurred to Crosby. For Jane, from the first, was doing an entirely new thing in fiction—and the eighteenth century publisher is to be pardoned, perhaps, for looking askance at it. Opposed to the entrancing heroines and sorely-tried heroes who barely supported a melancholy existence in a world of perpetual horror, Jane essayed the portraits of ordinary men and women who lived and had their being in a recognisable universe. It must have looked dull to the publishing eye glazed with the perusal of the super-world. What it had to offer could not, at that time, have looked very much like a "winner." It did not abound in suspense or surprise. It was a stranger to sadism or violence. It did not curdle the blood nor startle the nerves. It did not go to Germany—or anywhere else—for inspiration or local colour. It was home-grown, the work of an "eighteenth century miss."¹ If so, what was to be made of the writing?—of that

¹ Professor H. W. Garrod, M.A. (*Jane Austen : A Depreciation*).

simplicity, that blessed directness and exactness of style which had nothing in common with the pedantry of the age in which it was written? However you look at it, Jane must at this stage have been an undoubted stumbling block to the publishing world of her day. There is certainly some excuse for Crosby sitting so long on the fence and then jumping down on the wrong side—and in any case he was well punished by learning, too late, that *Susan* was by the author of *Pride and Prejudice*.

Yet, once published, the novels found favour and the first two enjoyed the distinction of fairly early second editions. But the publisher still kept a wary eye on public taste, and in 1814 Egerton was less confident about the proposed second edition of *Mansfield Park*, for in the November following its publication in May Jane is writing on the matter to her niece Fanny Knight, who had apparently inquired about it.

“Thank you, but it is not yet settled whether I *do* hazard a second edition. We are to see Egerton to-day, when it will be determined. People are more ready to borrow and praise than buy.”

That all three were well received we may judge from Jane's simple and unaffected pleasure in the

praise which every now and then floats along to her. "The P's have now got the book, and like it very much; their niece Eleanor has recommended it most warmly to them." "Lady Robert is delighted with *Pride and Prejudice*. And Mr. Hastings!¹ I am quite delighted at what such a man writes about it. His admiring my Elizabeth so much is particularly welcome to me." "Mary heard before she left home that it² was very much admired at Cheltenham." "They admire *Mansfield Park* exceedingly. Mr. Cooke says it is 'the most sensible novel he ever read,' and the manner in which I treat the clergy delights them very much." "Mr. Hastings is reading *Mansfield Park* for the first time and prefers it to *Pride and Prejudice*." And how pleased she must have been to receive that letter from her brother Charles, written from Palermo in 1815, in which he reported a young man of his acquaintance asserting that "nothing had come out for years to be compared with *Pride and Prejudice*, *Sense and Sensibility*, etc." "Oh, I have more of such sweet flattery from Miss Sharp," she writes in November, 1813. "I am read and

¹ Warren Hastings, godfather of Eliza Hancock, who had married Henry Austen in 1797.

² *Pride and Prejudice*.

admired in Ireland, too!" To Cassandra, she writes (in November, 1813—two years after it was published!), "Your tidings of *Sense and Sensibility* give me pleasure, I have never seen it advertised."

Over *Emma* she went to the trouble of collecting the opinions upon it of her acquaintances. These are useful in that they underline the contention that Jane's work was too natural to be liked by those who had been fed upon so highly spiced a literary diet. Somebody wanted "more incident" and somebody else thought it "too natural to be interesting," and so on.

But Jane, who in her lifetime had so little of it, says that though she liked praise "as much as anybody," she liked "pewter, too."¹ Yet during her lifetime her novels are computed to have earned for her less than £700, and we know that *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice* between them had earned £250 over a space of two years,² which does not seem excessive, but was certainly more than the modest Jane had anticipated. But the greatest pleasure in her work must have been the recognition given to her by the *Quarterly Review*,

¹ Her brother Edward's phrase (Letter from Jane to Fanny Knight, November 30th, 1814).

² Letter from Jane to her brother Frank, July 3rd, 1813.

upon the publication of *Emma*, albeit the notice was not glowingly generous nor very accurate in at least one of its conclusions. Nevertheless, notice by the *Quarterly* must have been a thing which all writers in that day must have desired, and whether or not the honour was accorded to Jane because, as has been suggested, *Emma* appeared with Murray, who owned the *Quarterly*, she could not but be gratified by the attention.

There is no doubt, I think, that Jane was aware that the article was by that Walter Scott whose novels she had put it upon record in the previous autumn she "did not mean to like if she could help it."¹ The phrasing of her letter to her publisher would seem to make that clear enough. She is sorry "so clever a man as the Reviewer of *Emma*" omitted all mention of *Mansfield Park* from his article, and regrets he "should consider it unworthy of being noticed," but adds very modestly that she has "no reason to complain of her treatment." Yet many authors would have waxed wrath at the misreading of Elizabeth Bennet's reason² for even-

¹ Letter to her niece, Anna Lefroy, September 28th, 1814.

² Scott says that she "did not perceive she had done a foolish thing (i.e., in refusing Darcy) until she accidentally visits a very handsome seat and grounds belonging to her admirer"—which rather indicates that the distinguished critic was not above the reviewer's habit of skipping.

tually accepting Darcy, and the suggestion of her "darling child" marrying for wealth and position must have cut her creator to the quick. However, perhaps she was consoled by the compliment he paid "the neatness and point of her narrative and the quiet yet comic dialogue."

It is a pity that she did not live long enough to know that Scott, re-reading *Pride and Prejudice* "for the third time at least," eleven years later, made amends. He calls *Pride and Prejudice* a "finely written novel" and declares Jane's talent for "describing the involvements and feelings and characters of ordinary life" the "most wonderful" he had ever encountered.

But eleven years is a long time. In 1815 Scott considered her "minute detail" a fault and found her "characters of folly and simplicity" apt to become "as tiresome in fiction as in real society."

Jane was no iconoclast, but she was certainly an innovator, and she suffered the usual fate of innovators. Posterity, like Scott, has amply made amends. It must amuse Jane, among the eternal Shades, to know that "the little bit of ivory (two inches wide) upon which she worked with so fine a brush" has found a niche in the Temple of Fame.

Chapter Five

SOME MONTHS AGO A SHORT STORY appeared based on that incident in Jane's life when she is said to have accepted and immediately retracted an offer of marriage. The narrative has point and interest for us here because of the reason put into Jane's mouth as an excuse for her behaviour. She believed marriage would interfere with her work, and in a laughing conversation with her protesting sister is made to say: "Never mind, Cassandra. The English novel is saved."¹

It is, I think, an effective but highly unlikely rendering of the accredited facts. Apart from the

¹ *Escape for Jane. (A Pedlar's Pack, by Elizabeth Goudge, Duckworth, 1937.)*

known circumstance of Cassandra having aided and abetted Jane over the retraction, I do not believe for a moment that Jane's conduct had anything whatever to do with her work or the fate of the English novel. She had made a mistake and had the courage to put matters right, a line of conduct entirely in accord with what we know of Jane's attitude to marriage.¹ Besides, at the time of the incident Jane had published nothing and her one attempt to achieve publication had been unsuccessful. Her career as the saviour of the English novel must have been a long way out of sight.

But the story raises an interesting point. Did Jane *ever* consciously think of "the fate of the English novel"? I very much doubt it. Jane wrote because she *had* to write and she wrote as well as she could because she was an artist and, like all artists, knew not only what she wanted to do but just exactly the best way in which to do it. Like most true artists, too, she was a better critic of her efforts than anybody else, if only for these two reasons. I suspect, all the same, that she did not know how good her work *was*, and if we may sometimes

¹ "Anything is to be preferred or endured rather than marrying without affection." (Letter from Jane to her niece, Fanny Knight. November, 1814.)

wonder how a woman born in a country parsonage, in direct contact neither with the busy world of affairs nor the best minds of her day, knew so much, the answer is that Jane was *born* knowing. She had a streak of genius that gave her the uncanny insight into the minds and motives of human beings and the power to transfer it to paper which has made and kept her name bright in the annals of our literature.

But that Jane did affect the fate of the English novel is sober fact. When she set out to debunk the high-flown novel of the period she did so, first of all, because although she enjoyed it she could not help deriding it, for Jane was a comedian and she knew that life was "not like that." She led an existence which, if not, as I believe (and as I shall hope later to show), as deficient in drama and excitement as we are so generally asked to believe, did run in a narrow channel over personal ground, and it must early have occurred to her that all the real drama and excitement of life came from human contacts and not from excursions into imaginary realms. She must have felt that, this being so, a novel ought to be as interesting when concerned with ordinary men and women and the "small

change" or everyday affairs as when it roamed after adventures in wider fields—into the Gothic world of horror and the supernatural, or into that of the high-souled romances of "sensibility" with which Jane and her family of inveterate novel readers were thoroughly acquainted. Setting out deliberately to try and make it so, what she did for the English novel, maybe unwittingly (since Jane was too modest to believe that her work had a significance beyond expressing her own idea of what a novel should be), was to turn it away from high-flown romance in the direction of everyday life—to set its feet on that path which, in the main, it has traversed ever since. The author of *Evelina* has been described as "the originator of the novel of simple home life,"¹ and Macaulay says that this first novel was also the first "written by a woman of life and manners, that lived or deserved to live." Fanny Burney's work and Jane's have undoubted affinities, but Jane took and used and fixed the form for ever. Her novels are, in short, epics of common life, and to that extent it may be true to say that she "saved" the English novel; but I am sure she had no thought of it. Yet she knew, I think,

¹ S. P. B. Mais (*A Chronicle of English Literature*).

that she enshrined in it not alone the ephemeral fashions and standards of her own day, but the things which belong to all ages. For to a sense of values Jane Austen added the not very feminine virtue of a sense of perspective.

It was Macaulay (a great admirer of Jane's) who said that we owed not only *Evelina*, *Cecilia* and *Camilla* to Fanny Burney but also *Mansfield Park* and *The Absentee*.¹ Nothing, perhaps, is more tedious than a consideration of the derivations of any author, past or present, but it would be ridiculous, I think, to pretend that Fanny was the sole influence upon the youthful Jane. We know that she read Miss Burney, and that she shared Dr. Johnson's admiration for her we may take for granted.² We know, too, that she was one of the subscribers to *Camilla* upon its appearance in 1796.³ It will be remembered also that she criticised that work in *Northanger Abbey*, not by the disparaging remarks of John Thorpe, who "never read novels," to Catherine Morland (for there is nothing more unsafe than to father the remarks or opinions of a

¹ By Maria Edgeworth (1812).

² In a letter (September 15th, 1796, when she was twenty) Jane gives an expressed admiration of *Camilla* as a "pleasing trait" in a young woman she met at a neighbouring house.

³ *Family Record*, p. 95.

character on to his creator), but by the author's own comment at the end of them—"this critique, *the justice of which was lost upon Catherine . . .*" Furthermore, it is more than likely that Jane owed something—at least of her plot—in *Pride and Prejudice*, and almost certainly her title, to Fanny Burney's *Cecilia*.¹ But if these things are demonstrable, or fairly to be inferred, it is also true that but for Mrs. Radcliffe and her numerous followers, we should have had either no *Northanger Abbey* or a very different one, and even, perhaps, no *Sense and Sensibility*. So that it would be at least equally just to count Ann Radcliffe and the Gothic School generally as one of the early Austenian influences—even if only to the extent of a determination on Jane's part to laugh at what, I feel sure, she and her novel reading family rapturously enjoyed, and of trying her hand at writing a novel which should succeed by exactly opposite methods. All Jane's work was ironical, more or less, and a desire to tilt at the trend and fashion of the day was certainly one of the early motives of her novel-writing.

¹ The plot of which turns on a number of misunderstandings between hero and heroine, upon which the final comment of one of the characters (Dr. Lyster) is, "The whole of this unfortunate business has been the result of *Pride and Prejudice*."

One authority,¹ at least, finds a similar tendency in Miss Edgeworth's *Belinda* (1801) and suggests that there must be other examples if anybody cares to dig them out, and that a reaction against the Radcliffian school was "in the air"; but it must be remembered that the first form of *Northanger Abbey* belongs to the years 1798-9, and that Jane attempted the same thing in the youthful high-spirited *Love and Freindship* even earlier.

So far as Fanny Burney is concerned, there seems to be a good case for suggesting that a young author, in search of a theme but with already a suave and burnished technique to her hand, did find inspiration in her *Cecilia*, and cannot entirely be acquitted of the sincerest form of flattery, but it must be admitted that *Pride and Prejudice* vastly improves on the model. One can be bored by *Cecilia* and *Delville*, by Elizabeth and Darcy never. And there is nothing in Fanny's story which has the wit and sparkle of Jane's, whilst in the matter of its style there can be no comparison. Macaulay has some hard things to say about Fanny's style,² at its

¹ Wm. Herries Pollock, in *Jane Austen and her Contemporaries*.

² He says it underwent "a gradual and most pernicious change, unexampled in literary history." He calls it "the worst style that has ever been known among men" for which he blames her intimacy with Johnson and her long residence in France.

later stages, but Jane's gathered beauty and power with the years, an exact medium for her art, modest, concise, and pointed with humour. Conciseness, indeed, she must always have had, for in one of the earliest of her letters we find her answering some comment of Cassandra's upon her use of it. "I am sorry that you find such a conciseness in the strains of my first letter. I must endeavour to make you amends for it, when we meet, by some elaborate details, which I shall shortly begin composing."

Words were Jane's servants. Her power over them was a conscious thing. She enjoyed the business of writing, and it is easy enough to believe the story related of her by a young member of the family—that she would often chuckle over something which she went to her desk to put down. In nothing, perhaps, does she so truly belong to her century as in the clarity and direction of her literary style, but of the deliberately "fine" prose of the period, the pomposities of Fanny Burney or the ponderous and frequently turgid sentences of her "dear Dr. Johnson," there is no sign. So entirely modern is the effect of its conciseness and simplicity that it is difficult to remember that she who used it has been dead for more than a hundred and twenty

years. In the last resort she writes as if nobody had ever written before. Her style comes out of nothing ; borrows nothing from anybody. And it was hers from the very moment she put pen to paper. It cannot be explained. No wonder Miss Mitford said that she would willingly cut off one hand if she could write like Jane with the other. At some time or other all writers must have felt the same.

Whatever literary influences are to be detected in Jane's work, and I do not pretend to have made any serious effort to unearth them, one thing is certain—she took from her precursors only the non-essentials. In fundamentals she is like nobody, ever, but herself. The observation that is in her work, the crispness of its narrative, the power of presenting characters and of making them talk—which things are the backbone of the novelist's art—are all present to an astonishing degree. The secret of good dialogue is the last to be vouchsafed by the gods to the novelist, but it was Jane's, and in a sense it is true to say that it was nobody else's, in the same degree, until our own age. It was a secret which Charlotte Brontë, who knew so many things, and some which Jane did not, never

learned. ("It is my spirit which addresses your spirit, Mr. Rochester," says Jane Eyre, young and in love !) Few novelists, until quite modern times, seemed ever to have heard ordinary men and women talking, but Jane's gift of "quiet yet comic" dialogue is from first to last outstanding.

As an inheritor of that comic spirit which moved in Fielding, whom she had doubtless read—though one mention of *Tom Jones* in her work¹ and another in a letter² to Cassandra are the only indications that she had—Jane saw things in a comic light, and her pen was studded with perennial irony as she writes them down. She had, too, as a writer, a power of construction that had never before been used in the interest of the novel. Her work was ordered and her plan clear from the outset. Nothing quite like it had appeared in English fiction before, and not the work of Fielding, or Richardson, Smollet or Sterne has the artistic perfection of Jane's. To them the novel was a sack—and an immense one—into which they could throw anything they liked, but to Jane it was much more like a quiet secluded garden upon which a gentle sun shone and across which the soft breezes ran to and fro. No

¹ *Northanger Abbey*, Chapter 7.

² January 9th, 1796.

storms came there, and the cold winds which bent poor Emily Brontë's trees all over in one direction are strangers there. It is true that the garden is small and the flowers sweet-smelling rather than flaunting or imposing—but that is what, in that formal period, makes it so astonishing. Those who like high and wind-swept open spaces will not care to walk over-much in Jane's garden, but that is very far from making hay of it. Its freshness and fragrance pervade our modern world like a blessing.

In comparison with the simplicity of her style Jane's plots are unexpectedly complex. She was not content to draw two or three characters in isolation. She preferred a family, with their numerous friends and acquaintances, and within her self-imposed limits obviously enjoyed making things as difficult as possible for herself. There is sufficient stuff in any one of her six volumes to serve the modern novelist for two or three good-sized stories—even in *Pride and Prejudice* of which she herself had doubts but that it needed "to be stretched out" with something she had not given it.¹ One story, one thread of narrative, was not enough for Jane.

¹ Letter to Cassandra, February 4th, 1813.

The tangle of human relationships was too intriguing for that. Perhaps it is because her novels turn so entirely upon the personal relationships that her one hostile critic among men of letters¹ has seen in them no more than love-stories, and dismissed them as "husband hunts, with but one plot." This critic's arguments, however, are tainted by an anti-feminist bias which makes even some of his more plausible arguments suspect. Jane's novels are certainly stories with a love-element that is developed to marriage, but nothing could be more inaccurate and uncritical than to call them mere love-stories, much less "husband-hunts." Indeed, so to describe them is to ignore one aspect of Jane's work which may be legitimately held to contain the most perfect gem in her crown as a writer—the brilliant comedy drawing of her minor characters. In every novel she wrote, though it may be impossible to separate the love-story from the rest of the book, there are at least as many scenes (and those among the best) which have nothing whatever to do with the story of the lovers. Think of the Dashwoods and Palmers in *Sense and Sensibility*; of Mr. and Mrs. Bennet, the inimitable Collins and

¹ Professor H. W. Garrod, M.A. (*vide* p. 18).

Lady Catherine de Bourgh in *Pride and Prejudice*, and all the avenues of interest in the youthful *Northanger Abbey* that have nothing to do with love. In *Mansfield Park*, too, the love-story is never obtrusive; we are quietly aware that Fanny loves Edmund Bertram, who is infatuated with another woman, but we are quietly aware also that all will come right in the end, and are therefore free to enjoy the comedy scenes in which figure Lady Bertram and the amazing Mrs. Norris. Whilst as for *Emma*, its theme is more properly not love at all, but the laughable errors of an inveterate match-maker, and although we are quite well aware of the fate in store for her own affections, we have very much to enjoy by the way. Think of Mr. Woodhouse and Miss Bates, to say nothing of the character of Emma herself, who is far more a figure of high comedy than she is ever a woman in love. *Persuasion*, perhaps, more truly deserves the description of "love-story" than any of its predecessors, but even here there is the unfailing comedy of Sir Walter Elliot and that of his two snobbish daughters, which, quite unconnected with the love-affair between Anne and Wentworth, has yet its appointed place in the scheme of the book.

But to-day the gibe that an author who deals with personal relationships (and not Communist Russia or Nazi Germany or the Spanish war or political Ideology in general) is concerned with "nothing but love" or thinks "love the only thing that matters," is so common that it is not surprising that it should be made retrospective and hurled also at Jane.

What can be said of the charge brought against her by the same critic that as a writer she was static, that she writes as well at twenty as at forty? It may be true (I think it is) that in *Pride and Prejudice* she writes as well as she did in *Emma* or *Persuasion*, but there is always the theory that *Pride and Prejudice* really belongs to the year 1811-12, and though this theory is, in fact, unproved, there can be no doubt that the book gained enormously by being at least revised during her maturity. But even if it were true that this "second novel" of Jane's could be proved untouched since 1797 and that *Emma* and *Persuasion* as pieces of writing are not demonstrably superior to it, it would still not be true to use the word "static" as indicating that nothing had happened to the author in the interval. Her early titles wore a didactic air, following the fashion of

the time—*Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*—though there was nothing in the least didactic about them; but in *Mansfield Park* that note is already heard very clearly, for Jane, now in her thirty-sixth year, possesses a deepened gravity and earnestness of purpose which all but plays havoc with two of her secondary characters and gives her heroine, Fanny Price, something of the air of a Morality character. The note is fainter in *Emma*, but it is still, despite its comedy, and despite Jane's reticence and sense of balance, a novel with an ethical purpose—and with the same results to two of its secondary characters; whilst it seems odd that anyone should fail to see in *Persuasion* no mellowing of outlook, no widening of sympathy. Jane was forty when *Persuasion* was written and if she is here delivering that "doctrine of the soul" which was what Professor Garrod "perhaps hated most about her," it is certainly not delivered by his "slip of a girl." She had no hand whatsoever in any of the three novels which form Jane's second writing period. The mature Jane has ceased to find any part of her inspiration in other people's books, and is now deeply engaged with her vision of life, intent upon the queer workings of fate, the

effects upon people of wealth and success, and the consequent unbridled liberty to please nobody but themselves. The high spirits, indeed, of *Pride and Prejudice* form one of the soundest reasons for believing that, in essence, at least, it belonged to her youth, that she did no more at a later date than improve and touch up, for quite that mood is never seen again, in anything she writes.

Jane Austen lived before the days of technical experiments and knew nothing of the stream of single-consciousness—that dark tunnel into which many a good novelist has disappeared and never again been heard of. Her plots may be complex but not her manner. She told her stories simply and straightforwardly, beginning at A and ending at Z, and never forgetting the order of the alphabet—an elementary discipline from which the modern novelist tends to break away. His story is frequently unfolded not only through the eyes and understanding of one or several characters, but the God-Almighty-Author is frequently content to do no more than bring them on to the scene, leaving the rest to them. It is a method, interesting though it undoubtedly is, which makes for length, and even had she heard of it Jane's neat and concise talent

would have rejected it out of hand. Jane is always the God-Almighty-Author, who knew everything about the men and women she created ; she held their minds and destinies in her hand, and if there are times when, for a space, they elude her, that only gives those of us who admire her a fresh angle of interest from which to regard her work. More than this, Jane was a keen and amused and even occasionally unkind spectator at the pageant of life. Her rôle was eminently that of the *commère*, but her sense of the dramatic is so sharp that she could both present and narrate, and it has recently been shewn with how little alteration *Pride and Prejudice* could be made ready for the stage.

But if she was no innovator in method, she brought wit and sparkle and shape to the existing novel form. No novelist certainly can read her works without delight in the neatness and shrewdness of their author's thrusts, in the modernity of her idiom, in the skill with which her characters are touched to life, and in the cleverness and revealing nature of the things they are made to say.

I cannot understand that Jane's novels should not be admired, but I can understand why some people should dislike them, for admiration and

liking do not really belong to the same plane. To the mere business of like and dislike we need bring no more than personal taste or prejudice, but for that of admiration or non-admiration we must bring qualities of a very different kind. Here you do not need to approve or disapprove. You need bring with you but one standard, answer two questions. (1) What has the author set out to do? and (2) Has he or she succeeded in doing it? Whether or not we like what he or she has set out to do is nothing to the point.

Approached thus, there can be, it seems to me, no doubt of the verdict in the case of Jane Austen. Of clear purpose and design, with a most perfect consciousness of what she was doing, Jane sought to depict the world she knew. Her painting was on ivory, in miniature, and quite exquisite. People who demand heavy oils, the misted magnificence of Turner or the immensity and sweep of a Constable scene, will not find what they want, perhaps, in Jane; but they will surely find much to admire? As for the people who proclaim aloud to-day, with every sign of self-satisfaction and assurance, that they dislike and cannot read her, they are a different matter, and require several chapters to themselves.

Chapter

Six

THE APPEARANCE OF *SENSE AND Sensibility* in the year 1811 must have made it clear to those who came across it that a new novelist had arisen who was a mistress of words and wrote with a sharply-pointed pen. If the pattern of the book was of the prevailing fashion, the colours were brighter and sharper. If it had, as the novels of Mrs. Burney and Miss Edgeworth had, a "theme" and an improving one (the importance of early environment and education, the value of self-control, of head against heart) it was amusingly conveyed. The author could observe people and understood already the comedy of manners. She was witty and could unfold a narrative with swift-

ness and economy, and her book must have delighted the discerning reader. Here surely was a new novelist who gave evidence of a fresh and buoyant talent?

It would be interesting to have some of the criticisms of these early novels, especially of the first two. Did anybody point out that Margaret, the youngest of the three Dashwood sisters, is almost entirely forgotten by her creator and that she serves no useful purpose when remembered? That things are sprung on the reader without sufficient preparation—like the marriage of Lucy Steele to Robert Ferrars? That Willoughby's horrid "past" is clumsily thrown at us through the unlikely recital of Colonel Brandon's to Elinor Dashwood? Did anybody detect a fundamental weakness in her secondary characters, there to serve nothing but the plot, and did anybody ever believe in Lucy's marriage or see it as anything but the short cut to happiness for Elinor and Edward Ferrars? Did her readers of that day realise that Jane had remembered in the nick of time that she was writing a comedy and that Elinor could not be left with a broken heart? These things are obvious enough to us to-day, but *Sense and Sensibility*,

nevertheless, shadows forth much that Jane was later to do. The comedy of the Dashwoods and the Palmers, the crisp narrative, the conversation, pointed in itself and entirely appropriate to the characters of the speakers—all these were the essential Jane. For all its occasional crudities and weaknesses of technique it was an astounding piece of work to have been written by an inexperienced and sheltered young woman before the completion of her twenty-first birthday. It definitely introduced something into fiction that had not been there before, and which was both individual and unique. It is an idle but fascinating employment to speculate upon what would have happened, what influence it might have had, if this new current had been introduced to the general stream of fiction fifteen years earlier than in fact it was.

Pride and Prejudice, taking it in order of its appearance, must surely be the best second novel ever published and if second novels are the acid test of a novelist, then Jane comes through it with flying colours. It is obviously by the author of *Sense and Sensibility*. Many of its scenes and two of the characters give the impression of having been developed from sketches presented in its prede-

cessor. Elizabeth Bennet has distinct affinities with Elinor Dashwood. Her attitude to life is the same ; high-minded, imbued with spirit and moral courage. She is the "clever" one of the family, but she has very little of Elinor's priggishness and a charm that the earlier heroine did not possess. Moreover, she is allowed not only to make mistakes but to make a mistake big enough to come near to wrecking her life's happiness. In Mr. Bennet we have the finished portrait for the first sketch of which Mr. Palmer sat in *Sense and Sensibility*. Into that gentleman's self-consequence, deplorable manners and air of neither pleasing nor being pleased, Jane has now got her writer's teeth, and in Mr. Bennet she has perfected the type. With Wickham, as the villain of the piece, however, she is no more successful, even perhaps rather less so, than she is with Willoughby ; but the portraits of Mrs. Bennet and, in lesser degree, of Elizabeth, raise the whole tantalising question of priority of date between *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility*. It is difficult to believe that, having created Mr. Bennet, Jane would have drawn Mr. Palmer, or that having given us Elizabeth she would have proceeded to the creation of Elinor Dashwood.

Youthful in conception, its maturity of execution is so astonishing that we must believe that both books were written much about the same time (*Sense and Sensibility* from the earlier *Elinor and Marianne*), and that *First Impressions* was worked upon later—probably finally while *Sense and Sensibility* was actually in the press—and is so very good because it had the advantage of Jane's wiser judgment and increased power over her medium. It therefore seems as if we should, in sheer gratitude, shift from the shoulders of the Rev. George Austen his share of blame in Cadell's point-blank refusal to be interested in *First Impressions*; but one of the most aggravating things in literary history must continue to be the complete disappearance of that earlier manuscript.

Pride and Prejudice shares with its predecessor one failure in characterisation, which is one of the few remaining signs of its earlier composition. Mary Bennet is as thin and vague as Margaret Dashwood—a mere daub in a portrait gallery of real men and women brilliantly delineated. If Mary was introduced as a satire upon the moralising young women of contemporary fiction, Jane seems early to have become bored with her and neglects

to bring her to life. The best that can be said of Mary Bennet is that for three-fourths of the time she forgets all about her, as she forgot Margaret Dashwood. But it is characteristic of Jane that at the end she disposes of her with one of her shrewdest thrusts :

Mary was the only daughter who remained at home, and she was necessarily drawn from the pursuit of accomplishments by Mrs. Bennet's being quite unable to sit alone. Mary was obliged to mix more with the world, but she could still moralise over every morning visit ; and as she was no longer mortified by comparisons between her sisters' beauty and her own, it was suspected by her father that she submitted to the change without much reluctance.

No book of Jane's quite recaptures the brilliance and wit of *Pride and Prejudice* and no other book has a heroine quite as perfectly conceived and presented as Elizabeth Bennet. There must have been a good deal of the young Jane in Elizabeth—the Jane who walked home after a dance beneath the shelter of two umbrellas, who dodged unwanted kisses, and essayed the mud of the Hampshire lanes.

She is also without doubt the mouthpiece for many of Jane's opinions. Certainly Jane was satisfied with Elizabeth, whatever else in her book roused her own critical judgment, and to my mind she is the most charming as well as the most intelligent of Jane's many charming and intelligent young women, perfectly realised, and presented without one false note. She and her father make a pair which would have ensured the success of any novel, apart from Darcy, the most successful and convincing of Jane's heroes, or the incumbent of Hunsford, the inimitable Mr. Collins, who belongs to the world of Micawber and Mr. Sam Weller. How providential that Jane did not "stretch it out with a long chapter of sense, if it could be had; if not, of solemn specious nonsense, about something unconnected with the story." Only Jane's artistry, however, could have prevented this fate overtaking it, for, writing to Cassandra in January, 1813 (the month of publication), she says: "The second volume is shorter than I could wish, but the difference is not so much in reality as in look, there being a larger proportion of narrative in that part. I have lop't and crop't so successfully, however, that I imagine it must be rather shorter

than *Sense and Sensibility* altogether.”¹ Nobody, probably, was ever in real life as consistently witty as Elizabeth or her father; nobody ever quite so silly as Mrs. Bennet (who never makes *one* sensible remark) or as imbecile and snobbish as Mr. Collins. Was this, perhaps, what Charlotte Brontë meant when she said that Jane’s work was “more real than true”?

To Charlotte, who did not understand irony and has no single trace of it in her books, who put down with eagerness and vigour that which she passionately believed, Jane delineated “but the surface of the lives of genteel English people,” though she adds that she does it “curiously well.”² Charlotte did not understand comedy nor realise that Jane, in *Pride and Prejudice*, already understood it perfectly; that in drawing Elizabeth, her father and the amazing Mr. Collins, she raises them to that point of articulation which quite properly removes them from the plane of mere actuality into that world of high comedy in which they say with perfect naturalness the things most people would like to say

¹ As to this, I think, Jane was wrong. In my edition (The Complete Novels of Jane Austen, Heinemann, 8/6) *Pride and Prejudice* is eight pages longer.

² Letter to her publisher, W. S. Williams, April 12th, 1850.

but are satisfied to think. Their self-realisation is intensified and unified : it is not that they are larger than life but that they are twice as natural. Jane makes us believe in her people so intensely that we never stop to say : " I don't believe this, that or the other thing." Elizabeth, her father and mother and the egregious Collins are as real to us as Beatrice or Rosalind, as Benedict and Falstaff. Miss Mitford said she liked *Pride and Prejudice* because it " made her feel gay." It is certainly the most brilliant and amusing of all Jane's novels, and here indeed " what sees keenly, speaks aptly, moves flexibly," it has suited her to study, and she " ruffles her reader by nothing vehement, disturbs him by nothing profound."¹ It is a story, perfect in its comedy elements, polished, lively, and full of humour. We may " admire " others of the novels more but we can " like " none better.

Northanger Abbey, which belongs alike to the spirit and period of the youthful *Love and Freindship*, is a little spoilt for the ordinary reader to-day by a limited acquaintance with the Gothic novels at which it begins by poking fun—a state of affairs

¹ Letter to her publisher, W. S. Williams, April 12th, 1850.

anticipated perhaps by Jane in 1816 when she wrote the preface for the first edition (which did not appear until after her death) when she asked the public to bear in mind that thirteen years had passed since it was written, and that "places, manners, books, and opinions have undergone considerable changes." Writing to her niece, Fanny Knight, early the next year¹ she says: "Miss Catherine is put upon the shelf for the present, and I do not know that she will ever come out."² Perhaps, despite her revisions, the book still dissatisfied her, or she did not think it wise to publish so youthful an effort after *Emma*; but it seems equally possible that Jane realised that she had missed the psychological moment for publication, and that a satire even partially aimed at Mrs. Radcliffe and the Gothic school was a little out-of-date, though Byron had had a dig at it in 1809 with his reference in *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* to "wonder-working Lewis, monk or

¹ Lord Brabourne dates this letter 1816, but it is believed to be shown by internal evidence (*Family Record*) that it must belong to the March of the following year.

² Jane seems to have had some difficulty with her heroine's name. The book referred to here is obviously *Northanger Abbey*, originally sold as *Susan*, apparently the first choice of Christian name for Catherine Morland.

bard, who fain would make Parnassus a church-yard ! ” and probably Jane had read this when, in the April of that year, she attempted to rescue the novel from her publisher’s drawer in which it had lain for the last six years. We know, too, that in 1807 she had re-read *The Female Quixote*,¹ the adventures of which are held by one critic,² at least, to have served as a model for Catherine’s own. Jane certainly admired it, for in January, 1807, she put it upon record that the Austen family had exchanged a book they didn’t like for *The Female Quixote* which “ now makes our evening amusement, to me a very high one, as I find the work quite equal to what I remember it.” Mdlle Villard’s suggestion that Jane had been reading it first when she planned *Northanger Abbey*, seems very likely to have been the fact. Altogether it must have appeared to Jane that this particular fire at which she had warmed her youthful hands was waning. So Miss Catherine was “ put upon the shelf,” and there, I feel, Jane meant her to stay, since, that was

¹ By Charlotte Lennox. Published in 1752, more than twenty years before Jane Austen was born, it had lived on. It dealt with the effects upon a young woman of an over-indulgence in Scudéry, and was praised by Fielding and Johnson.

² Mdlle Leonie Villard.

written in March, 1817, and it is generally held that *Northanger Abbey* was being prepared for the press in 1816 and Jane's preface would certainly be written at the same time. But there is a good deal of reason, I think, to be grateful that other hands took her down from the shelf when Jane's were cold and lifeless.

Northanger Abbey unquestionably suffers not only as satire—from an imperfect knowledge of the thing satirised; but as a story—from a divided purpose upon the part of its creator. As a narrative it has a broken back. Started in the spirit of a good-natured, high-spirited "skit," with Catherine Morland appropriately silly as the young woman who judged life by the sensational fiction she imbibed, and seasoned her own existence with "romances" and "horrors" that did not exist, and yet could remember the danger to her new straw hat in a downpour, the book later becomes frankly romance.¹ As Jane got more interested in her heroine, the satire slips out of it and Catherine and her misfortunes, her love for Henry Tilney and the realisation of her heroine's idiocy, occupied Jane for the rest of the way. For Catherine "the

¹ The only one of Jane's six novels so described.

anxieties of common life began to succeed to the alarms of romance." She is shocked by the perfidy of her friend, Isabella Thorpe, who has thrown over her own brother and become engaged to Henry Tilney's. She is humiliated by her host's sudden change of front on discovering that her family is neither rich nor important, and, "too wretched to be fearful," she journeys home alone, her friend, Eleanor Tilney, providing the wherewithal. "A heroine in a hack post-chaise is such a blow upon sentiment as no attempt at grandeur or pathos can withstand. Swiftly, therefore, shall her post-boy drive through the village, amid the gaze of Sunday groups, and speedy shall be her descent from it."

"You know, my dear Catherine, you always were a sad little shatter-brained creature: but now you must have been forced to have your wits about you, with so much changing of chaises and so forth," says Mrs. Morland on hearing the story, and adds: "I hope it will appear that you have not left anything behind you in any of the pockets!"

Mrs. Morland, who, from an excess of maternity left her elder children to their own devices, and had

sent Catherine on her six weeks' visit to Bath with no more caution than that she would wrap up her throat at night and try to keep an account of the money she spent, considered dispassionately that General Tilney had "acted neither as a gentleman nor as a parent." It is left to their friend, Mrs. Allen, of "the trifling turn of mind," to utter the *mot juste* upon him and his conduct. "Very unfriendly, certainly—he must be a very odd man!" Distinctly odd! General Tilney, in fact, whom Catherine, on no evidence at all, had arraigned in her romantic mind for murder, is impossible. He lacks verisimilitude and subtlety and is clearly a youthful conception, a piece of machinery evolved for working out the original satirical intention of the book. His realm, in so far as he exists at all, is farce and not comedy, just as Catherine's is romance and not satire. The minor characters—Catherine's brother, James, and John Thorpe (who criticised the novels he did not read) are mere etchings, and Eleanor Tilney no more than a study for a character we should have been glad to meet again, whilst Henry Tilney himself, who hears with so little horror and so much amusement of Catherine's harbouring of such dreadful suspicions of his father,

is not altogether a satisfactory character, and is more truly to be regarded as another piece of machinery for the curing of Catherine's romantic follies.

And that, I think, is the really interesting thing about *Northanger Abbey*. Light-hearted though it is, it contains the fundamental idea at the back of all Jane's work—correction by experience and contact not with books but with actuality. Like Marianne in *Sense and Sensibility* Catherine had to be cured of her romantic notions and undue "sensibility." She had to suffer and learn. "It is a great comfort to find that she is not a poor helpless creature," said Mrs. Allen, unaware that in noting the salutary fact of Catherine's safe arrival home, she is also noting the first stage in her "cure."

Northanger Abbey, however, has an interest quite unconnected with satire, characterisation or story, for in it are so many glimpses of the real Jane. More than any of these three novels of her first writing period, does it reveal the young author herself, as well as what she was, at this stage, capable of as a writer. Impossible not to believe she was in earnest when she stepped into the middle of her

comedy and held up the scene with her indignation over the frequent contemporary attitude to novels—not alone of those who read them but of their creators.

Isabella and Catherine, in the first transports of their friendship, shut themselves up together to read novels—those same volumes which Isabella has already recommended warmly to her friend as “all horrid.” And Jane says :

Yes, novels, for I will not adopt that ungenerous and impolite custom, so common with novel writers, of degrading, by their contemptuous censure, the very performances to the number of which they are themselves adding : joining with their greatest enemies in bestowing the harshest epithets on such works, and scarcely ever permitting them to be read by their own heroine, who, if she accidentally takes up a novel, is sure to turn over its insipid pages with disgust. Alas, if the heroine of one novel be not patronised by the heroine of another, from whom can she expect protection and regard ? I cannot approve of it. Let us leave it to the Reviewers to abuse such effusions of fancy at their leisure, and over every new novel to talk in threadbare strains

of the trash with which the press now groans.¹

Oh, Jane, thou shouldst be living at this hour !

Belonging to a family of inveterate novel-readers, her letters are full of the books they read together—and the novel is predominant. Writing to Cassandra at the close of 1798, she puts on record a remark from a certain Mrs. Martin who was opening a new library in the neighbourhood, and in appealing for subscribers, sought to give tone to the venture as well as to propitiate the more conventional of her likely patrons by announcing that her Collection was not to consist “only of novels, but of every kind of literature.” “She might,” writes Jane, “have spared this pretension to *our* family, who are great novel-readers and not ashamed of being so.” A born novelist herself, the young Jane at all times resented the scorn reserved for this Cinderella of literature. It is sad to hear later that the Martin enterprise was not saved by its devotion to the higher forms of literature.

And in the following passage, Jane gives us a characteristic touch :

¹ Chapter 5.

. . . . I will only add, in justice to men, that though to the larger and more trifling part of the sex, imbecility in females is a great enhancement of their personal charms, there is a portion of them too reasonable and too well informed themselves to desire anything more in woman than ignorance. But Catherine did not know her own advantages; did not know that a good-looking girl with an affectionate heart, and a very ignorant mind, cannot fail of attracting a clever young man, unless circumstances are particularly untoward.¹

And here is another, which, *mutatis mutandis*, is so modern that it might come from the pen of more than one well-known novelist writing to-day. Henry Tilney has remarked that "Everybody allows that the talent of writing agreeable letters is peculiarly female," and Catherine, seeking, perhaps, as Miss Bingley said of Elizabeth Bennet, "to recommend herself to the other sex by undervaluing her own," says she has "often wondered whether women *do* write better letters than men."

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¹ Chapter 14.

usual style of letter-writing among women is faultless, except in three particulars."

"And what are they?"

"A general deficiency of subject, a total inattention to stops. And a frequent ignorance of grammar."

"Upon my word, I need not have been afraid of disclaiming the compliment. You do not think too highly of us in that way."

"I should no more lay it down as a general rule that women write better letters than men, than that they sing better duets, or draw better landscapes. In every power of which taste is the foundation, excellence is pretty fairly divided between the sexes."¹

In short, talent, of any sort, has nothing to do with the accident of sex. In an age when women who wrote hurried to cover the tell-tale pages with some piece of really useful work if visitors were announced, this is a significant conclusion, a piece of conversation not out-of-place even at this time of day, when the world is still busy dividing itself into male and female and assigning qualities and distributing talent and achievement according to sex. It is significant also that Jane puts this com-

¹ Chapter 3.

mon-sense conclusion into Henry Tilney's mouth, for Tilney throughout the novel is not only a means of bringing Catherine to a more reasonable view of life but obviously the chosen mouthpiece for the common-sense observations that are so essentially Jane's.

The argument as to which is the best of the six novels will never be done, and I suppose few people would award the palm to *Northanger Abbey*. All the same, if I were asked which of them I would recommend to someone who had never read a line of Jane, it would be *Northanger Abbey*. For when you have said that this is an immature book, that the burlesque is very "young," that some of the characters really won't "do"—unless you toss comedy over the border into farce; when you have said that the story begins on one plane and ends on another, one thing remains unaltered. This novel, less revised and worked over than any of the others, contains the quintessential Jane. More often than in any of the others, does she hold up her narrative to say something she very much wants to say, so that after reading it we feel we do really know what the youthful Jane was like; and more than that we understand what, as a novelist, she

was after—not so much the deriding of books which had, after all, given her a good deal of pleasure, as of those who took them too seriously. Though in a sense *Northanger Abbey* was “made” from books, it is away from books to life that it points, for Jane knew that books were a poor substitute, after all, for life. Her “morality,” as a novelist, is here almost indistinguishable from her humour and sense of comedy, but it is clearly present—education through experience and observation of reality. Moreover, her heroine, for all her initial gullibility, is a real person, more human and lovable than Elinor Dashwood, less static than the delightful Elizabeth, less of a model “good” young woman than the meek Fanny Price, less aggravating, even at her silliest, than the match-making Emma, “whom no one but myself will much like,” as Jane said of her when she began upon her creation; or than Anne, “who is too good for me.” Despite Jane’s latter-day diffidence, “Miss Catherine” did not deserve to be “put upon the shelf,” much less left there. Her story is not Jane’s best work but it contains some of her best things. It arrays for us, at the outset, her essential talents as a writer as *Pride and Prejudice* arrays her

genius, and it takes us into some of the secret places of her heart. To read it is not only to learn what the youthful Jane could do as a writer, but something of what she thought and felt and believed ; what moved her to indignation and what to mirth. To know that of any human-being is to know a good deal.

Chapter Seven

NORTHANGER ABBEY, BEGUN IN THE August of 1798, six months before Jane's twenty-third birthday, is generally supposed to have been finished in the following year. Apart from the fragmentary *The Watsons*, Jane, as we know, wrote nothing during the Bath and Southampton period, and *Mansfield Park* was not started until February, 1811—a year and a half after the settlement with her mother and sister at Chawton. The reasons for this arid stretch in Jane's creative life have already been considered, and when in 1814 *Mansfield Park* made its appearance, it is quite clear that her writing mood had changed.

When Jane began work upon this (her fourth)

novel, she was thirty-four, and to be thirty-four in the year 1811 was to be middle-aged. It was in this year that Jane comments upon having heard herself described as a "pleasing-looking young woman." "That must do—one cannot pretend," she says, "to anything better now. Thankful to have it continued a few years longer."¹ But if the high spirits which had informed *Pride and Prejudice* and *Northanger Abbey* had undergone that natural discipline of the advancing years that is not explanation enough to account for the deepening mood of seriousness in which she sat down to write *Mansfield Park*. I do not believe she meant us to be very amused by it. I do not think it amused her very much to write it. She confessed that she did not consider it "half so entertaining" as *Pride and Prejudice*, but hoped the credit of the earlier book would stand it in good stead as to sales.²

What had happened to Jane? Was it something which had occurred in the interval between the finishing of *Northanger Abbey* and the writing of *Mansfield Park*? Or must we look elsewhere for the cause to balance our effect? The question of

¹ Letter to Cassandra, April 13th.

² Letter to her brother Frank, July 3rd, 1813.

her "romances" need occupy us no further: they are but conjectural and conjectural, therefore, must remain their effect upon Jane. But quite apart from any affair of the heart gone awry, consider some of the events of Jane's youth and early middle years. We are so used to being told that her life was placid and uneventful, with nothing but the writing and, presumably, the publication of the novels to break its line of monotony, that we are in danger of accepting it without even a casual examination. Yet, for a girl brought up in a quiet country parsonage, Jane's life was anything but dull and uneventful. Apart from the pleasant round of social intercourse and jollity to which her youthful letters bear delighted witness, Jane and her sister had quite exceptional opportunities for a change of scene in the visits they were able to pay their brother Edward and his wife, first at Rowling and then at Godmersham, in Kent. Edward had been adopted by a connection of the family named Knight, and upon the death of his patron had succeeded to his estates. Jane's letters are full of descriptions of her journeys to and fro and of references to her doings while there and, in addition, it is clear that the contrast between two very different ways of life

is not lost upon her acutely observant mind. She means to have dumplings put in the next ox-cheek they are to have for dinner, "so that I may fancy myself at Godmersham," and "Kent is the only place," she says, "for happiness; everybody is rich there!" There are references also to visits farther afield to Gloucestershire and trips to Bath, when Edward was staying there for a gout "cure" with his wife, or when invited to stay with her aunt and uncle, the Leigh Perrots, who frequently went there for a similar reason. For a young woman of her age and period, in fact, Jane must have led anything but a dull and monotonous existence, except on the supposition that life in the country, at any age and in any period, is so to be described.

Neither were excitements of a different order wanting in Jane's young life. The famous trial of Warren Hastings, impeached in 1785 for cruelty and corruption, and not acquitted until seven years later, must have been a topic of special interest to the Steventon household through his association with Jane's cousin, Eliza de Feuillide, who was his godchild. Eliza, who was fourteen years older than Jane, had been born in Calcutta and educated in France. Jane was only seven years old at the time

of her marriage to the Comte de Feuillide, but Eliza seems to have kept in touch with the family whilst in France, for in 1786 she is expecting a visit from James, Jane's eldest brother, and when she came to England that year she proposed herself for an "immediate visit" to the rectory.¹ In 1788 she attended the trial and had "the satisfaction of hearing all the celebrated orators—Sheridan, Burke, and Fox,"² whilst in August of the same year she and her mother are at Oxford and being shewn "the lions" and the Colleges by her cousins, James and Henry Austen, who afterwards "elegantly entertained" them at St. John's.³ Jane was in her twentieth year when Hastings was acquitted, and since we know that in 1813 she was proud to have the commendation of "such a man" for *Pride and Prejudice*, we may be pretty sure that Jane shared her family's admiration for him as "a high-minded patriot, a warm and disinterested friend, and a scholar whose approbation was an honour."⁴ There is surely every reason to suppose that, as a young girl, both trial and subsequent acquittal must have added excitement and interest to her life,

¹ *Family Record*.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

and we may be very sure that were there any letters of Jane's belonging to an earlier year than 1796 we should find in them a good many references to Warren Hastings' affairs.

But there is another event a year later which must have made a very deep impression upon the sensitised plate that was Jane's mind, for in the early part of 1794 her cousin Eliza's husband was arrested in Paris on a charge of suborning witnesses in the interest of his friend, the Marquise de Marboeuf, who was charged with conspiracy against the Republic. The whole story, as given by the authors of the *Family Record*, reads like one of those romantic novels written around the terrible events at that time happening in Paris, except that this one had a tragic ending for the hero, for the Comte, as well as the woman he had tried to help, were both sentenced to death and guillotined in the month of their arrest. The high-spirited Eliza, who had lost her mother in 1792, and now found herself a widow, with a delicate child, seems to have kept in close touch with the Steventon family, and three years later was taken still further into the family by marriage with Jane's favourite brother, Henry. The tragedy, therefore, together with the general

trend of affairs in France, must have been stamped down into the young Jane's consciousness.

But this was not the only acquaintance Jane was to make thus early with tragedy. If it did not touch her on the shoulder, in touching one whom she loved as dearly as Cassandra it came near enough for her to look into its chill blank countenance. Cassandra had become engaged about 1795 to a young man whom they had both known all their lives. He had taken Holy Orders and gone to the West Indies as chaplain to Lord Craven's regiment, and here he had died of fever, in the February of 1797, one of the years for which there are no letters available.

Two years later another event occurred which if not tragic might very well have been so, and must have left a mark of its own upon the sisters. In the early summer of 1799 Jane and her mother were at Bath, staying with Edward Austen who was taking the waters for his gout, and as it happened, the Leigh Perrot aunt and uncle were also there for a similar reason. The families saw a good deal of each other before Jane and her mother went home at the end of June, and in the August Mrs. Leigh Perrot was arrested in Bath on a grand larceny

charge, which in this case means that she was charged with as paltry a piece of shop lifting as ever was brought against anybody. Incredible as it may sound to us to-day, as the law then stood Aunt Leigh Perrot might, had she been convicted, have been hanged for this crime, and it would have been no sort of consolation to her to have learned in some happier world that she was the last woman to be hanged under it, the law being changed soon after her trial, which became a *cause célèbre* and may even have contributed to its overthrow. As it was, this respectable matron spent seven months in Ilchester gaol and was tried at Taunton in March, 1800. The trial lasted seven hours; the accused, following the procedure of the Courts of the day, had to put her own case, the judge took seven hours to sum up—and Mrs. Leigh Perrot was acquitted. Her husband spent, it is said, “nearer two thousand pounds than one” on her defence, and anticipated an adverse verdict, so difficult in those days was it for the accused to prove their innocence.

So incensed, we are told by the family chroniclers, was Jane’s mother at this charge against so intimate a member of her own family that she offered Jane and Cassandra as companions to her sister-in-law

during her seven months' incarceration in Ilchester gaol—an offer, however, which Aunt Perrot declined. Yet there are still people who will continue to tell us that Jane Austen's life was dull and uneventful !

But if we are looking for some reason for Jane's change of mood when she was writing *Mansfield Park* in 1813, all these things, it will be objected, happened at dates either anterior to the writing of Jane's early novels or while they were actually being written, and might, therefore, be expected to have affected the mood of these books rather than those which came later, which certainly was not the case. The answer is, I think, that Jane was young and resilient, her vitality abundant, and that she had set out to write of life as a comedy and at no stage of her life ever succeeded, in fact, in writing of it as if it were a tragedy. But even in *Pride and Prejudice*, we find Elizabeth Bennet declaring, "The more I see of the world the more am I dissatisfied with it,"¹ and on the evidence there seems no special reason to believe this to be a later interpolation. As for the Leigh Perrot misfortune, this may very well have been at least a contributory

¹ Chapter 24.

cause of the long period of non-creativity which followed upon the conclusion of *Northanger Abbey*.

But there were other events which, as the years passed, must have dimmed a little Jane's vitality and love of life. There were two violent deaths which touched her very nearly—the first that of her cousin, Lady Williams, who had been Jane Cooper, with whom she and Cassandra had been at school, who had been a frequent visitor to the rectory, and who had been married from there. She was killed instantly in a carriage accident in the summer of 1798, at which time Jane must have been busy with the first draft of *Northanger Abbey*. In 1804, on Jane's birthday, her close friend, Mrs. Lefroy, was killed by a fall from her horse, and this, too, must have been a very great shock to both Jane and her sister, since so many of their girlhood memories were linked up with her. But worse followed, for a month later Jane lost her father; four years later Edward's wife died with tragic unexpectedness, and three months after the publication of *Pride and Prejudice*, Eliza (de Feuillide) Austen died after a long and painful illness. There was, in addition, a state of perpetual war on land and sea which seemed to have been clamped down upon the nation,

and in which her sailor brothers were concerned. The effect of all these things over a number of years was unquestionably cumulative, and although to the end Jane protested that the depicting of misery was not for her pen, there is no doubt that they had a definitely sobering effect upon that buoyant spirit which was Jane's by nature.

Her new gravity of mood and earnestness of purpose, however, have the effect of making the heroine of *Mansfield Park* the least successful of all Jane's young women who fill that rôle. Not only so, but it constrains us to lodge a charge of uncertainty against her drawing of two of her secondary and very important characters, Henry Crawford and his sister Mary. Clearly designed as foils, in their worldliness and selfishness and love of pleasure, to the self-effacing Fanny, they actually emerge as nothing save pieces of machinery for the proper working out of the story.

The theme of *Mansfield Park* Jane herself described as "ordination," but this will not be very apparent to the reader. It is true that the question of Edmund Bertram's taking of Holy Orders is an important thread in the story, and that he is, perhaps, the most satisfying result, so far as character-

drawing goes, of Jane's new approach, for he is not only the best clergyman Jane ever drew, but the first in whom we can believe. The book, however, is not built upon the theme of ordination, nor even upon Jane's new style of clergyman, but upon the personality of Fanny Price, its Cinderella heroine, who is rescued from a poor home by casual wealthy relatives, to become their willing slave, to fall in love with the only one of them, her cousin Edmund, who ever attempts for years to treat her as a human being, and to live to become the stay and prop of the family in time of adversity and, of course, the wife of the sensible and kindly Edmund.

Jane had a liking for Fanny as she had for Elizabeth—a very different person. In the book itself¹ she refers to her as “my Fanny” and obviously intends that we shall like her, too, and it is perhaps a little perverse in me that she should seem only a meek and rather tiresome young woman—what this disrespectful generation would call “sub”—who allowed everybody to use her as a doormat and continued to look as if she scarcely noticed it. The utmost spirit which is allowed her is to feel “almost vexed into displeasure and anger.” It is impossible not to feel that Lizzie

¹ Chapter 48.

Bennet would have resolved Fanny's situation in the course of a few weeks, and I would give a good deal to have heard her putting Mrs. Norris in her place. It is impossible also to care very much about Fanny's misfortunes or her subsequent happiness, which, this being a Cinderella story, was a foregone conclusion. Since the whole framework of the book is really built around Fanny, this feeling I have about her disposes, as far as I am concerned, of any claims that *Mansfield Park* may have as the "best" of Jane's novels; but there is another thing which invalidates it—the humour is, for Jane, as "sub" as Fanny herself. Lady Bertram is the only really comic character—Mrs. Norris grates on us too sharply to make us do much more than smile on the wrong side of our mouths. There is no humour in Fanny and none in Edmund, although he makes us smile when we feel we are not intended to smile, as in his confidence to poor Fanny after his final interview with Mary Crawford. "I thank you for your patience, Fanny. This has been the greatest relief, and now we will have done." But they hadn't—for Edmund begins all over again and is only stopped by Lady Bertram's waking up, like the Fat Boy, and making a remark.

The central weakness of *Mansfield Park* resides, however, neither in Fanny nor Edmund, neither of whom is free from priggishness—that venial sin this generation, which has made a graven image of toleration, regards as mortal. They are what they are—clearly seen, consistently presented. Whether you like them or not they hang together; but Henry and Mary Crawford do not, and the comparative failure of a book often charming and always immensely readable and entertaining, is bound up with this brother and sister.

To look first at Henry. Like the man meeting the giraffe for the first time, “I don’t believe it.” It is a strain upon our credulity to ask us to believe that he ever fell in love with Fanny or, if he did, that he ever went to the length of pursuing her with so much persistence after she had refused him. Even if his flirtations with Edmund Bertram’s sisters were to be explained, as Mary Crawford declared, entirely by his fault of “liking to make girls a little in love with him”—a fault which she considers “not half so dangerous to a wife’s happiness as a tendency to fall in love himself,” what are we to make of his conduct with Maria Rushworth so soon after his parting with Fanny,

who had been comforted by "the wonderful improvement" she fancied she saw in him? That his vanity was aroused? Obviously.

He saw Mrs. Rushworth, was received by her with a coldness which ought to have been repulsive, and have established indifference between them for ever; but he was mortified, he could not bear to be thrown off by the woman whose smiles had been so wholly at his command; he must exert himself to subdue so proud a display of resentment; it was anger on Fanny's account; he must get the better of it, and make Mrs. Rushworth Maria Bertram again in her treatment of him.

Maybe. But the intrigue which followed—without any "excuse of love, with no inconstancy towards her cousin?" Nobody can believe that Henry Crawford was ever constant to anything but his own pleasure and amusement. Did he ever do either of these preposterous things? Did he ever propose to Fanny or run off with her married cousin? As Jane draws him it is improbable he would have done the first and impossible that he should have done the second, for divorce and the social obloquy consequent upon it, were things

Henry's self-centred, calculating nature would have most carefully avoided. But this is not all. How can Jane say, when the divorce goes through and Henry and Maria become "each other's punishment," that "Maria had lived with him to be reproached *as the ruin of all his happiness in Fanny*"? Fanny was never within a thousand miles of making Henry happy. She objected to his "principles." She considered it "quite impossible we should ever be tolerably happy together, even if I *could* like him. There were never two people more dissimilar. We have not one taste in common. We should be miserable."

Jane's hand never falters in the drawing of Fanny. We are never in the slightest doubt as to her heroine's real feeling either about Henry Crawford or about Edmund Bertram, and it is the book's central irony that Edmund himself should have been so blind to her feeling for him. So far as Crawford is concerned, even when her uncle, who desires she shall accept him, sends her back home, like a naughty child, to discover (from bitter contrast) what she is missing in refusing him, and even after they have met again, Fanny's attitude does not alter. When he has gone she can think of nothing

save that he was returning to town and would be frequently with her beloved Edmund. When she goes back to Mansfield Park one of her chief sources of happiness is that "she was safe from Mr. Crawford and that Edmund was no longer the dupe of Mary." I can think of nothing Fanny really approved about Crawford save his rendering of Shakespeare! I do not charge Jane with Mrs. Norris's indictment of Fanny. When did Jane ever make that lady utter *her* sentiments upon anything? It is Mrs. Norris, not Jane, who thinks that if Fanny had accepted Crawford he would not have run away with her dear Maria. But it is Jane herself who tells us that had he persevered Fanny must have been his reward—"and a reward very voluntarily bestowed, within a reasonable period of Edmund's marrying Mary."¹

But if Jane's hand shakes over Henry Crawford it does no less so over his sister—or else we must consider that Fanny was neither fair nor generous to her, and Jane, I am sure, meant her to be both. Mary, in the first place, in all her early relations with the Bertrams, is just a pretty girl, with a private fortune, a worldly disposition and standards,

¹ Chapter 48.

many fashionable friends, and a deep affection for her brother ; but presently we find her animadverting in a surprising fashion against the clergy of the day. True, she wanted to marry Edmund and did not, therefore, want him to enter the Church, but would she have said the things Jane makes her say ? They are not in the least the kind of things we should expect an idle fashionable young woman to say, and indeed some of the arguments, coming from the worldly Mary, have unconscious humour. A clergyman, she says, has " the best intentions of doing nothing all the rest of his days but eat, drink, and grow fat. . . . Indolence and love of ease make men clergymen. His curate does all the work, and the business of his own life is to dine." Of her own uncle, Dr. Grant (to whom the living which should have been Edmund's had been sold by his father to pay his elder brother's debts), she is made to say, that though he is a gentleman, kind to her and she daresay " a good scholar and clever, often preaches good sermons, and is very respectable," yet to her he is only " an indolent, selfish *bon vivant*, who must have his palate consulted in everything ; who will not stir a finger for the convenience of anyone." Mary is here made to

drag in poor Edmund's ordination by the hair of its head. It is unfair to judge her by these things she is made to say of it, for she would never have said them, even if the idea of the man with whom she fancied herself in love taking Orders—and without a living !—was to her an absurdity, not to be borne in silence. Self-centred, a little spoiled, but affable and kind, tactful and as resentful of the rudeness of Tom Bertram and Mrs. Norris to poor Fanny as was Edmund ; that is Mary.

But is it ? What about the Mary who shows herself so callous about Tom Bertram's illness and during it writes the letter, which so disgusts Fanny, in which she asks if “ Sir Edmund ” would not “ do more good with all the Bertram property than any other possible ‘ Sir,’ ” and hints that if the heir dies she would marry Edmund ! Mary's letters are uniformly outrageous ; only—would the other Mary have written them ?

To Fanny, however, Mary's offence is that she is not only in love with Edmund, she means to marry him if she can. She would “ hesitate, she would tease, she would condition, she would require a great deal, but she would finally accept him.” And that Mary should have encouraged her

brother to accept an invitation which meant a meeting with his old flame, Maria Rushworth, *née* Bertram, just because she was curious to see what would happen was, to Fanny, "all in her worst line of conduct, and grossly unkind and ill-judged. But she hoped *he* would not be actuated by any such degrading curiosity. His sister ought to have given him credit for better feelings than her own."

And later, after the Rushworth débâcle, we have Edmund's picture of Mary—of a girl whose faults were those of principle, "of blunted delicacy and a corrupted and vitiated mind," a girl to whom the only sin was that of being found out. But if she was the same girl who wrote the Letters she is convicted of much beside. What becomes then of the Mary who played in *Lover's Vows* and was disturbed by the frankness of her part, or the Mary who talked such sound sense to her brother when he declared he could not be satisfied without making a "small hole" in Fanny's heart?

The truth is that there is no portrait of Mary in *Mansfield Park*. She is a palimpsest. One picture is pasted over another but nothing is built up; nothing either composite or definite remains in our minds. Mary, like her brother, is a cog in the

machine whereby Jane's ends—of story-telling and moral purpose—were achieved. They had to stand for definite things, play a certain rôle, bring about certain situations and, in addition, press home Jane's lessons of environment and education, her conviction that only by instilling the principle of duty into the young could they conquer their follies and tempers. They were part of Jane's scheme, useful pieces of machinery, but she never made up her mind what kind of human beings they were and so they never came really alive. Their very complexity seems oddly in contrast with the arrow-straight consistency of Fanny, upon whom she lavishes all her affection and approval. But Jane queers the pitch of the Crawfords from the start, and consciously or unconsciously, and incomplete as they are, we find ourselves championing them against their creator. Which is all wrong. But it is not without interest to-day that the troubles of the family of *Mansfield Park* all spring from the behaviour, not of Mary and not even of her brother, but of the two daughters of the house, who, brought up to an idle life of "accomplishments" and with no guiding principles, fell without a struggle into the trap life spread for them.

Mansfield Park, as a story, is less probable, perhaps, than any of the others and even the keenest admirer of Jane will not feel that she was at her best in the chapter which, piling Pelion upon Ossa over the double elopement of the Bertram sisters, falls sharply into melodrama. But the book occupies a position of importance as the first in which the deepening and maturing of the more serious side of Jane's genius is to be seen, and because it has more "heart" than any other, with the exception of *Persuasion*. Oddly enough, it is a book which has, perhaps, more admirers than any of the others.

Jane was happy when she started work on *Emma*. It was March, 1814. *Pride and Prejudice* had been out for a year, had earned for her golden opinions, had justified her belief in herself as a writer, and had brought her a measure of self-realisation. *Mansfield Park* must have been at the publishers, since it appeared in the May of that year, and Henry, while Jane is with him in Henrietta Street, has begun to read it—in proof or in manuscript?—as early as March 2nd, when Jane reports to Cassandra that his "approbation is hitherto even equal" to her wishes. He found it (as he could scarcely help

but find it) “very different from the other two, but does not appear to think it at all inferior.” When he arrives at the marriage of Maria Bertram she is “afraid he has gone through the most entertaining part”—and so perhaps he had. But he “took to” Lady Bertram and Mrs. Norris “most kindly and gives great praise to the drawing of the characters. He understands them all, likes Fanny, and I think, foresees how it will all be.” Later we find that he “admires Henry Crawford: I mean properly, as a clever, pleasant man.” (Oh, Henry!) Later still, “Henry has this moment said that he likes my M.P. better and better. . . . I believe now he has changed his mind as to foreseeing the end. He said yesterday, at least, that he defied anybody to say whether H. C. would be reformed, or would forget Fanny in a fortnight.” An easy bet!

But Henry’s praise was sweet to Jane and it is a thousand pities that none of the letters of this clever brother, who acted as her agent, has survived—and none of hers to him. Both, I feel sure, would contain much that would be not only interesting but valuable about the novels, and that would throw light upon the personality of the author.

Jane by now has begun to feel her feet as an

author. She knows exactly what she can do, even in this new piece of ground which *Mansfield Park* has opened up, but which she is temporarily deserting with the new book now under way. She is enjoying herself in town, in all the bad weather;¹ at the theatre, where Kean had made his debut in the January, at Drury Lane; at the shops, and with Henry's men friends. Henry himself has had a year in which to recover from his bereavement and is casting a roving eye over his feminine acquaintances; and indeed as far back as the previous July Jane has recorded his "spirits very much recovered," and declared that "sincerely as he was attached to poor Eliza," the circumstances of her long and dreadful illness and his knowledge "that she must die" had made it "indeed a happy release at last." There is nothing, at the time when Jane is writing those early chapters of *Emma*, to disturb her mind. She even believes that the dispute over her brother's Chawton inheritance is to be settled without recourse to law, though as to this she was wrong.

The appearance of *Mansfield Park* in the May and the good opinions of her friends concerning it all added to the well-being of her writing mood.

¹ "The hardest winter for twenty years." Brabourne, Vol. II, p. 218.

Her Bookham cousins, the Cookes, thought it "the most sensible novel they had ever read," and approved her handling of the clergy, whilst Henry's friends—especially that Mr. Haden who came to dinner bringing "good manners and clever conversation"—were warm in its praise. In addition, European affairs were looking more hopeful. Wellington had defeated Soult: the allied Sovereigns had entered Paris and Napoleon was deposed. It is not surprising therefore that the new book should be a comedy, as near a return to the mood of *Pride and Prejudice* as Jane, nearly twenty years after its conception, was likely to get.

Apart from the fact that *Emma* was the last of Jane's novels to appear in her lifetime, there are two others which need to be mentioned, the first that it was dedicated to the Prince Regent, said to be an admirer of her work, and the second (much more important) that it was the first of her novels to be reviewed in the *Quarterly*. Scott at this time was at the height of his fame, having confirmed his reputation as a romantic poet by his success with the first of the Waverley Novels, and a review from his pen was beyond doubt an honour. It is with this book that Jane—two years before her death—

may be said to have "arrived" and is generally well to the fore as a favourite when the "best" of Jane's novels is under discussion. Only—*is* there a best?—or merely one we prefer? None is perfect but each contains perfect things.

In *Emma* Jane has forgotten her flirtations with melodrama and does not so much as skirt the edge of tragedy. From first to last it is pure comedy. Its lesson—and there is one—is implicit in its comedy, and that is centred in Emma herself, for she is as much the pivot of the story as is Fanny of *Mansfield Park*. She is a young woman who has a natural place in Jane's portrait gallery, for the "real evils of her situation," Jane tells us, were "the power of having rather too much of her own way, and a disposition to think a little too well of herself." In short, Emma's upbringing had been as lacking in discipline and the lessons of self-control as had that of the young Bertrams.

The story turns upon the match-making proclivities of Emma Woodhouse. Convinced that she had arranged the marriage of the companion of her girlhood (Mr. Woodhouse's "poor Miss Taylor that was")—though George Knightley

believed, with truth, that the marriage would have arranged itself very nicely without her—the habit has grown. Nothing will serve save that she shall marry off her protégée, Harriet Smith, “a natural daughter of somebody,” whom Emma exalted in her mind to noble rank. Having managed to alienate her easy affections from the young farmer upon whom they were fixed, she sets about the business with so much zest and with so complete a lack either of observation or intuition, that she succeeds in making a reasonable amount of trouble for everybody, not excluding herself. But though the comedy is sustained throughout so thoroughly that never for a second does tragedy rear its head, there are things in *Emma* that do not wear a very pleasant face—the game, for instance, which Frank Churchill plays with Emma to hide his secret engagement to the governess, Jane Fairfax, created little short of a scandal and would surely in Jane’s day actually have made a great deal more. Emma’s baseless and wicked suspicions concerning Jane, and the incidents of the pianoforte and Alphabet game are both in atrocious taste, so far as Emma and Churchill are concerned, but Emma never perceives this. Rebuked by her admirer Knightley, “Oh,”

she cries, "it all meant nothing, a mere joke among ourselves." "The joke," he gravely replied, "seemed confined to you and Mr. Churchill."

As a character, however, Emma Woodhouse must be counted one of Jane's most successful creations. She is deeply and thoroughly realised, and except in so far as her behaviour over Jane Fairfax is concerned, consistently portrayed. About her Jane says, mainly in the person of Knightley, some delightfully revealing things, as when she makes him criticise her friendship for Harriet. "How can Emma imagine she has anything to learn herself, while Harriet is presenting such a delightful inferiority?" Moreover, she has the distinction of being the one character in the novels who does really *grow*. From being a self-satisfied conceited silly girl she becomes a young woman who sees herself as she is, and has the grace to be ashamed. We are also made to feel that she *had* learnt her lesson, had suffered a sea-change. In future, we feel, she would make some attempt to subject that "very dear part" of her fancy to that understanding of which earlier the devoted George Knightley had despaired.

Jane, we know, said of her that nobody but her-

self would like Emma much, but she was wrong. We do come to like Emma considerably, and this is a great compliment to Jane's art, for there are times when she seems to us detestable, and mischievous to the point of wickedness. Jane presents Emma as spoiled and unruly, but she was also idle, and her middle-name was Interference. Yet there was a core of goodness in her which Jane very adroitly, and in the face of our reluctance, makes us recognise.

But if to Emma belongs the distinction of presenting Jane's second most successful heroine, it cannot be denied that, as in *Mansfield Park* with the Crawfords, it is impossible to escape the suggestion that though Jane saw why Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax had to be in her story, and just exactly the parts they must play in it, she never quite made up her mind what sort of people she intended them to be. What, after all, do we know about Jane Fairfax? That she was delicate, suffered from headaches; that she played and sang well and that she was extremely and perpetually cautious of word and deed; that she liked walking and made the business of fetching her letters an excuse for it; that she had a nice complexion, was exactly of Emma's age and was "accomplished and superior"

and fond of trying new ways of doing her hair. Also, that the idea of being a governess was abhorrent to her. ("I was not thinking of the slave-trade—governess-trade, I assure you, was all I had in view.") She says very little, and nothing revealing, and seems curiously meek under Emma's atrocious comments about her, and in her presence, to Frank Churchill, though we hear later that, stung by his conduct, she at last released him from their secret engagement. Jane Fairfax is one of her creations whom Jane, I feel, intended us to like; but it is impossible to like anybody so thin and vague. Jane Fairfax is a failure, considered either as a human-being or as a cog in Jane's intricate machinery. ✓

And Frank Churchill? George Knightley's view of that young man is sound as far as it goes. He did not like him or approve of his behaviour (and would not, we feel, have done so even if his own feelings for Emma had been different). He thought him conceited, selfish, proud, and weak. He thought him too fond of a life of pleasure, and "extremely expert in finding excuses for it." He considered Emma's "amiable young man" to be "amiable only in French," and that he had "no

English delicacy towards the feelings of other people"—and therefore was not really "amiable at all." This is true enough. In so far as Frank Churchill exists he comes near to deserving Mr. Knightley's epithets of "coxcomb" and "puppy," but *does* he exist? Is it not a fact that the letter which he writes to his step-mother wipes him clean out of existence? George Knightley was right again here. "He can sit down and write a fine flourishing letter, full of professions and falsehoods. . . . His letters disgust me." The truth is that Jane, who could use the letter so cleverly to further her plot and illuminate character, could also use it too cleverly, as has already appeared in those of Mary Crawford. In the hope of rehabilitating Frank Churchill in his own esteem after his secret is out, Jane only succeeds in making us realise what we had before suspected—that he has no existence at all, and that he has never been anything but a puppet dangled by Jane in front of Emma and by Emma in front of everybody else. Frank and Jane Fairfax form yet another example of Jane's fondness for the theme of a rich young man marrying a poor girl: but neither of them ever has anything but the most tenuous hold upon reality, and to the end they

defeat Jane's endeavours to do anything for them. Neither of them is sufficiently understood or more than superficially realised.

On the other hand, Jane's minor characters in this book are among the best she has ever given us. Mr. Woodhouse is one of the most amusing of her pieces of comic characterisation. If Jane allows herself a certain degree of licence in drawing him, she never steps over the edge of comedy into caricature, as in Mr. Collins or Lady de Bourgh, or even the vulgar Mrs. Elton. Amiable, yet fussy, and older than his years, a hater of changes of all kinds and of matrimony most of all as "the origin of change"—("But, my dear, pray do not make any more matches; they are silly things and break up one's circle grievously.")—everything he says springs quite naturally from his disposition and habit of mind. He lives in a world of old people, who tire easily and who do not like late hours, and his brief excursions into Emma's world of the young and lively, or the preludes to his decisions not to make them, are among the chief sources of the amusement he creates in the book.

"No doubt James will get you there very safely; and when you get there you must tell

him at what time you would have him come for you again; and you had better name an early hour. You will not like staying late. You will get very tired when tea is over."

"But you would not wish me to come away before I am tired, papa."

"Oh no, my love, but you will soon be tired. There will be a great many people talking at once. You will not like the noise."

"But, my dear sir," cried Mr. Weston, "if Emma comes away early it will break up the party."

"And no great harm if it does," said Mr. Woodhouse. "The sooner every party breaks up the better."¹

Miss Bates is another of the successes of *Emma*. If she was sometimes a bore to her many acquaintances, she was a very lovable one. She was "a great talker upon little matters, which exactly suited Mr. Woodhouse." An agreeable rattler and, maybe, sometimes something of a trial to those who may think as Scott did, that there is a little too much of her,² she is an authentic human being. Jane herself says of her that

¹ Chapter 25.

² Reviewing *Emma* in the *Quarterly*, Scott thought Mr. Woodhouse and Miss Bates "too long dwelt upon."

she loved everybody, was interested in everybody's happiness, quick-sighted to everybody's merits ; thought herself a most fortunate creature, and surrounded with blessings in such an excellent mother, and so many good neighbours and friends, and a home that wanted for nothing. The simplicity and cheerfulness of her nature, her contented and grateful spirit, were a recommendation to everybody, and a mine of felicity to herself.¹

Mrs. Elton was also a "great talker on small matters," but the difference between them is immeasurable. We laugh *with* Miss Bates, but *at* Mrs. Elton, for one has a loving heart and the other no heart at all—mere surface affability that masks self-satisfaction and inherent snobbery and vulgarity.

"My brother and sister have promised us a visit in the Spring . . . and that will be our time for exploring. While they are with us we shall explore a great deal, I daresay. They will have their barouche-landeau, of course, which holds four perfectly ; and therefore, without saying anything of *our* carriage, we should be able to explore the different beauties extremely well. They would hardly come in their chaise, I think, at this season of the year . . ."

¹ Chapter 3.

² Chapter 32.

Mrs. Elton is of those who tell us the price of all their belongings and, with a glance, contrive to put a price on all ours. Her every kind action towards, or slightest interest in, another human-being is rooted in self-importance and self-advertisement. "Insufferable!" exclaimed Emma. "Absolutely insufferable!" A little of Mrs. Elton goes a long way, but if Jane knew that, she was not deterred. There is a good deal of Augusta Elton in *Emma* and perhaps rather more than we would have chosen. Yet how supremely well these three people might be transferred to the stage!

Persuasion, Jane's last and posthumous novel is in a class apart. Whether you think it the "best" of the six or not, it has about it something which none of the others, not even *Mansfield Park*, has to such a degree—a quality of emotion recollected in tranquillity, a quiet but relentless probing into the human heart; whilst it lacks entirely that rich sense of high spirits which *Pride and Prejudice* possessed and which in *Emma* is present in lesser degree. In a way, *Persuasion* is fittingly the last of Jane's novels, for in it she seems to be looking over her shoulder at the years that are gone—as if already (a whole year too soon!) she heard Time's wingèd

chariot at her door. It is a story that though it reminds us of *Pride and Prejudice*, in the election of one of several sisters to an elevated social position, and in the situation of the hero in regard to her; and of *Mansfield Park* in its drawing of a family and picture of a central figure, is like neither of them. It has, to begin with, a much more definite flavour of a "romance" than any other of Jane's novels—certainly than *Northanger Abbey*, which appeared with it, and was so described. Its deepened emotion, its turning away from realism without ever deviating into sentimentalism whilst retaining a firm hold upon common-sense, a fundamental sanity and a sense of values, are the rich flowers of a maturing soil. And Anne Elliot herself, whom Jane thought Cassandra might like, though she herself found her "too good," is beyond question the most mature of Jane's heroines and the one most clearly seen in the round. Of no other of her heroines does Jane tell us that she had fallen "deeply in love," and she extends the statement to include her hero, Captain Wentworth. But they parted—because Anne had yielded to the worldly persuasion of Lady Russell, who, since her mother's death, had acted as the family guide and counsellor. Anne was young,

Captain Wentworth's profession of sailor was his sole means of livelihood, and Anne is over-persuaded. Eight years later, he has not forgiven her. He considered that she had shown "feebleness of character" and timidity—had fallen from the pedestal upon which he had placed her. "Her power with him was gone."

But not his with her. When she finds that destiny has arranged that they are soon to meet again, she is distressed, aware that the years have made no difference to her love, and that she still feels as she did when for Wentworth's sake she refused Charles Musgrove, who speedily consoled himself with her sister Mary. This story of their re-union is compact of understanding and tenderness, and infinitely kinder, as a whole, than any other book Jane ever wrote, whilst Anne's happiness is a matter to the reader of infinite importance. One would have been disappointed and regretful if Elizabeth Bennet and Emma Woodhouse had not achieved marriage with the men of their choice, and sorry if Fanny had not secured Edmund Bertram, but only of Anne is it true to say that a sense of real tragedy would have befallen us if Wentworth had married elsewhere. Anne stirs our

emotions as the rest never do, and the comedy that is in *Persuasion* stands clear of Anne. With her Jane struck a new note—a note that is nearer passion than she had ever reached before (if we do not count Maria Rushworth—and Jane, I am sure, did not) and, as if she knew this, and suspected herself of too much “sensibility,” we find a certain hardening of the heart in other directions, notably towards Mrs. Musgrove and her “fat sighings over the destiny of a son whom alive nobody had cared for,” and whom she had had “the good fortune to lose before his twentieth year.”

Wentworth has affinities with Darcy in his resentful attitude to Anne and with Crawford in his indiscriminate attentions to two sisters, and he is important less in himself than by reason of the fact that Anne loved him, but I do not believe that she ever thought of Sir Walter's heir as Jane surmises—she felt about him precisely as Fanny felt about Henry Crawford. There are no characters in *Persuasion* as amusing as Miss Bates or Emma's father: it wears the more solemn air of *Mansfield Park*, and depends for its success upon the character of Anne, and in her moving and beautifully related love-story.

Chapter Eight

I HAVE ALWAYS CONSIDERED IT A PITY that *Lady Susan* was ever taken from its drawer, and it is difficult to believe that Jane would not have agreed with me. Had she known that she was never to make the return journey from Winchester to Chawton, it is highly probable she would have gone through her manuscripts and almost certain that she would have destroyed *Lady Susan*. Written so far back as even perhaps to antedate *Elinor and Marianne*, there is nothing about it which bears the impress even of the most youthful Jane, save her fondness for the epistolary style. The very plot is essentially un-Austenian, but we know that Jane at that time was given to "borrowing"

some part of her plots and situations, and it is quite likely that that of *Lady Susan* may have been someone else's, and in the plight of Lady Susan's ill-used daughter, Frederica, there is decidedly a hint of Fanny Burney's *Evelina*. Lady Susan having ruined her own husband by her extravagance, and finding herself a widow at thirty-five, proceeds to rob one woman of her husband and another of her suitor. Presently she attempts to force Frederica to marry the second of them, of whom she is already tired, while turning her own attentions to yet a third. Frederica runs away from school in a mad attempt to escape her fate, is brought back, kept a prisoner in the country with her mother's married sister, and ultimately appeals to her mother's third lover to intervene for her. Clearly, in abandoning this story, Jane must have decided it was one with which she could do nothing. Did she suspect already that bad women were not for her?—that she was going to be even less successful with them than with bad men?—and was she, perhaps, dismayed by the fact that she had allotted to Lady Susan the chief part in the story? Bad women she essayed later. Lucy Steele is bad of heart; Maria Rushworth was unprincipled and

Mary Crawford was meant to be worse than she actually turned out; whilst Lydia Bennet was brazen-faced in her sin, but none of them does Jane allow to occupy the centre of the stage. *Lady Susan* followed the fashion of the day in being cast in the epistolary style, and Jane, who had probably already tried the method, must have known how ill it suited her gifts as a writer, cutting her off from the exercise of her especial powers—as a narrator, as a commentator and as a writer of dialogue. However you look at it *Lady Susan* was a mistake. Had Jane re-drafted it, as she did *Elinor and Marianne*, into direct narrative it might have had life and interest; and that she did not attempt to do so would seem to show that, young as she was, she knew the subject was not one over which she would be wise to spend any further time; and there is no doubt she was right.

The Watsons is a different matter. These few chapters of an unfinished novel were written during her sojourn at Bath, not earlier than 1803, as the water-marking on the paper bears witness. They were, therefore, probably begun in the mood of encouragement that must have followed the sale to Crosby of *Northanger Abbey*. These Chapters have

about them something of the flavour of *Mansfield Park*, and, if experimental, are certainly not immature, though here and there signs of the writer's youth are not wanting. But though the book begins well, town life seems to have prevented Jane's talent from functioning at its best, and there is nothing in *The Watsons* that is of any real interest save the picture it gives (as does *Northanger Abbey*) of Bath in the early years of the new century, and the touches which suggest the later Jane. For it is certainly interesting to note the similarity of the situation she created in *Mansfield Park*—a rich girl taken out of her humble sphere and then sent back to it, but in *The Watsons* she goes back to it for good. The grouping and contrasting of the sisters is a true Austen touch, though less convincing than was the case in *Pride and Prejudice*. In fact, none of the characters is very clearly etched, and it might very well have been that Jane regarded the existing chapters as a false start. Did she mean, had she lived, to re-write them, or did she think not only that she had set her story "too low"¹ as regards her heroine, but "too high" as regards some other of the characters? Whatever

¹ *Family Record*.

the reason, it is impossible not to feel that Jane's judgment was right and that in their present form those early chapters of *The Watsons* would never in her lifetime have seen the light. But as none of the manuscripts of any of the six novels has survived, *The Watsons* has interest because it affords us a sight, so to speak, of Jane's workshop. We know from these pages that she wrote a neat and beautiful hand, that some of the pages "flow on without difficulty, while others are subject to copious corrections," and that she used small sheets of paper, at least in this instance, "which could be easily covered with a piece of blotting-paper in case of the arrival of unexpected visitors."¹

The novel which was interrupted by death had no title, but when published was called *Sanditon*, the name of the seaside place in which the action took place. The idea of the story was a satirical one, developed at the expense of the hypochondriacs of the day and of those who perceived that there was money in the exploitation of those places where they congregated. None of these people is very much alive, however, at the time Jane relinquished the book, and at the end of the twelve

¹ *Family Record*.

chapters I did not feel impelled to wonder what parts they were all destined to play. They got a little out of control because Jane was a sick woman and the hand on the bearing rein faltered. Had Jane recovered her health, these chapters, I feel, would have been rewritten. It is a matter of small moment, indeed, but one of interest to Janeites, that in this novel she has moved away from her usual plain girl-names—Emma, Catherine, Jane, Elizabeth, and Anne—and introduces us to young women named Esther and Diana. Diana, I fancy, must have been a favourite with her, for in 1811 she writes to Cassandra apparently suggesting it for a new niece. “My¹ name is Diana. How does Fanny like it?”

These posthumous pieces tell us nothing. They come to us laden with the pathos that belongs to all such publications and they satisfy a perfectly reasonable curiosity about Jane the writer. But they add nothing to the portrait of Jane Austen which exists in the six novels and in the Letters.

One other fragment remains however, and is of a

¹ Mr. Chapman suggests that Jane might have written “her,” in which case she would seem to be informing Cassandra of the Christian name of a cousin—a certain Miss Harding, to whom she has referred in the letter. But she is obviously a little struck with the name.

very real interest, because it shows us so clearly the kind of talent that even as early as the age of seventeen was coming to birth in Jane. This is the piece of juvenilia entitled *Love and Freindship*, as she spells it—but spelling was never, perhaps, a strong point with Jane, for “neice” and “beleive” continually greet us. In his delightful Preface to this early work G. K. Chesterton calls it a “satire on the fable of the fainting lady,” and reminds us that it has been said that in Jane Austen’s world “a lady was expected to faint when she received a proposal.” To those, says Mr. Chesterton shrewdly, who “happen to have read any of the works of Jane Austen, the connection will appear slightly comic,” and goes on to point out that Elizabeth Bennet had “two proposals from two very confident and even masterful admirers; and she certainly did not faint. It would be nearer the truth to say that they did.” And he puts his finger, as usual, upon the point of the whole thing. This early work of Jane’s, he says, satirises the swoon of sensibility not “because it was a fact . . . but solely because it was a fiction.” Strangely enough, it seems to have been read *au sérieux* by some people, whereas it is obviously born of that

same mood which later moved Jane to write *Northanger Abbey*, in which she is laughing not at fact but at fiction and less, perhaps, at the writers of it than at the people who took it seriously. Mr. Chesterton says that he would willingly have left *Lady Susan* in the wastepaper basket if he could have pieced together *Love and Freindship* for a private scrap-book—"a thing to laugh over again and again, as one laughs over the great burlesques of Peacock or Max Beerbohm." And indeed *Love and Freindship*, to a lover of Jane, is a delicious thing, full of the high spirits that did not quite desert her all her life, and of that sublime sense of the ridiculous which Mr. Bennet possessed in such measure, and which inspired her when she drew Mr. Collins and when she wrote so many of the Letters.

One Evening in December . . . we were on a sudden, greatly astonished, by hearing a violent knocking on the outward door of our Rustic Cot.

My father started—"What noise is that?" said he. "It sounds like a loud rapping at the door," replied my mother. "It does indeed," cried I. "I am of your opinion," said my father, "it certainly does appear to proceed from

some uncommon violence exerted against our unoffending door." "Yes," exclaimed I, "I cannot help thinking it must be somebody who knocks for admittance."

The door is opened and a "most beauteous and amiable Youth" enters.

The noble Youth informed us that his name was Lindsay—for particular reasons however I shall conceal it under that of Talbot.

He explains that his father is a "mean and mercenary wretch" who desires him to marry Lady Dorothea.

"No, never," exclaimed I. "Lady Dorothea is lovely and engaging; I prefer no woman to her; but know, Sir, that I scorn to marry her in compliance with your wishes. No! Never shall it be said that I obliged my father!"

We all admired the manliness of his reply. He continued:

"Sir Edward was surprised; he had perhaps little expected to meet with so spirited an opposition to his will. 'Where, Edward, in the name of wonder (said he) did you pick up this

unmeaning gibberish? You have been reading novels, I suspect.' I scorned to answer."

Here, in every line of this piece of juvenilia (dedicated to Eliza de Feuillide) we have the germ of much that came later to fruition in Jane Austen's work. Already we see the realist not only poking fun at the romantics but calling their attention to facts, her irony already a weapon of some force and finish. This early trifle, so amusing in itself, so charged with significance in relation to what was to follow, was not printed until the year 1922. Yet it is not only the most interesting of all the Fragments, it is the only one which adds something to our knowledge of Jane—and something important, for it lets us into the secret that lay at the back of everything she wrote. And for that reason, travesty, trifle as it is, its publication was a matter of real importance to literature.

Chapter Nine

JANE AUSTEN'S MEN HAVE BEEN CALLED puppets. Jane, we are often told, could not draw men—and this belief disposes of her work for some people once for all, as the charge also disposes of a large body of contemporary feminine fiction. In Jane's case, how far is it true?

Let us frankly admit before we go any further that Jane certainly could not draw "bad" men—but then I don't suppose she had ever met any. Neither Willoughby, in *Sense and Sensibility*, nor Wickham, in *Pride and Prejudice*, is convincing—though there are some surprisingly sound touches about Willoughby's confession to Elinor Dashwood—and even her worldly men, like Crawford and

Churchill, as I have attempted to show, are never deeply studied or understood. But since Jane belonged to an age and a class of society which rigidly limited her experience, this is not surprising. What, though, of her heroes—Darcy, Bingley, Tilney, Edward Ferrars, Edmund Bertram, George Knightley, and Wentworth? Lord Brabourne¹ has given it as his opinion that they are all “decidedly inferior to the heroines.” He finds them less vigorously drawn and “less interesting to the reader. In every case it is *she* and not *he* who is the prominent figure in the play.” (This is certainly true). Darcy, he further tells us, is the only one of Jane’s heroes for whom he feels much regard; he places Edmund Bertram next in order of merit, and frankly confesses that he “never could endure George Knightley.” But he does not call them “puppets.”

The thing that is at once clear about Jane’s men is that she does not see them in “the round”—they are never shown at work, not do we, in most cases, hear much about even their stated occupations. Wentworth, for example, is a sailor who has been made commander “in consequence of

¹ *Brabourne, Ed. of the Letters*, Vol. I, p. 82.

the action off St. Domingo," but was not "immediately employed" when he came to Monkford and met Anne Elliot. We hear of him as having been Captain of the frigate *Laconia* and later as just returned to England ("or paid off or something," as Louisa Musgrove puts it); and he is again "unemployed" when he and Anne meet, years later, at Kellynch. He occupies himself, in the main, with finding a wife and in flirting, much as Frank Churchill is made to do, with two sisters, Louisa and Henrietta Musgrove. There was, Jane tells us, "a very general ignorance of all naval matters throughout the party, and he was very much questioned as to the manner of living on board, etc." He has something to tell them of unseaworthy vessels and of some of the ships in which he has sailed, and there is a modest reference to his own exploits in the taking of privateers. We do feel that Wentworth *was* a sailor and that he liked his job, and for this Jane was doubtless indebted to her sailor brothers. Nevertheless, as always, it is not with Wentworth the sailor that Jane is concerned but with Wentworth the man, the admired of Louisa and Henrietta, the beloved of Anne.

Bingley was the tenant of Netherfield Hall and the possessor of an income inherited from his father of nearly a hundred thousand pounds. Darcy owned Pemberley, a property in Derbyshire, and we are told that the estate was a noble one, "a clear ten thousand per annum," and that when Elizabeth first saw it she was impressed. Her "mind was too full for conversation, but she saw and admired every remarkable spot and point of view. At that moment she felt that to be mistress of Pemberley might be something." But if Mr. Darcy ever attended to his estates or had trouble over them we do not hear about it. Neither is any concern of Jane's. Darcy is there to fall in love with Elizabeth, to be spurned by her and be misunderstood, and finally to show the mettle of which he is made by taking Mrs. Bennet for a mother-in-law.

Henry Tilney is a clergyman, though we should hardly be aware of it if Jane did not tell us so. He takes his duties lightly—so lightly that we never hear of them. He, too, is there to serve Jane's purpose, which is the correction of Catherine's more romantic follies; to be loved by her, and eventually to bestow upon her his heart and hand. He might be anything.

The rôle of clergyman sits lightly also upon Edward Ferrars, so that when he is appointed to the living of Delaford we almost feel sympathy with his objectionable brother when he says that "the idea of Edward's being a clergyman and living in a small parsonage house, diverted him beyond measure, and when to that was added the fanciful image of Edward reading prayers in a white surplice, and publishing the banns of marriage between John Smith and Mary Brown, he could conceive nothing more ridiculous." Indeed, his idleness is even made by Edward himself to stand as one of the reasons for his early infatuation for Lucy Steele. "It was foolish, idle inclination on my side, the consequence of ignorance of the world—and want of employment."

George Knightley was a man of easy means and the master of Randalls when first we make his acquaintance. His brother John is a lawyer—one of the few men in the Austen novels with a definite profession other than the Church—but he does not play a very important rôle in the book and we hear of him not as a lawyer but only as Isabella's husband. Mr. Weston, who had married "poor Miss Taylor that was," had "succeeded early in life to a small

independence" and becoming "indisposed for any of the more homely pursuits in which his brothers were engaged," had entered "into the militia of his county," until, finding on the death of his wife that he was "rather a poorer man," he quitted the militia and engaged in trade, "finding a favourable opening which brought just employment enough," and presently realised for him another "easy competence." When we meet him he has retired—at thirty-seven-or-eight!—to enjoy the possession of Randalls, which he has recently purchased. His constant conferences with William Larkins, however, are the only practical interest allowed him in the place he had so long coveted.

Edmund Bertram is destined for Holy Orders from the first, but is debarred by the debts of his elder brother, in whose interest the family living has been sold to that Dr. Grant whom Mary Crawford so frankly criticised. He spends his youth, apparently, acting as brother and mentor to Fanny Price, but eventually his ordination is accomplished and, more than any of the clergymen in Jane's novels, he convinces us that he actually became one and that he took his calling with a seriousness foreign to any of the others. But for the

greater part of the book he is *not* a clergyman. Like all the other men of Jane's creation he is primarily a country gentleman.

Henry Crawford's chief claim to attention is that he was the owner of Everingham and four thousand a year, but it nowhere appears that the inheritance imposed the least responsibility upon him. His whole life, so far as one may judge from his appearances at Mansfield Park, was one long search after pleasure. Work and Henry Crawford were not even on bowing terms.

But neither the absence of a "job" in the lives of her men, nor the absence of Jane's stressing of the "job," where one is indicated, not even her lack of knowledge of men's affairs that was responsible for these things, converts her men into "puppets." Certainly it does not so convert her heroes. There are excellent human touches in all of them and some sound observation, even in the failures like Churchill and Crawford. In Willoughby's view of his own conduct with Eliza Williams, whom he seduced and deserted, there is a note of surprising modernity.

"I cannot leave you to suppose (he tells Elinor) that because she was injured she was

irreproachable, and because *I* was a libertine *she* must be a saint. Of the violence of her passion, and the weakness of her understanding—I do not mean, however, to defend myself. Her affection for me deserved better treatment, and I often, with great self-reproach, recall the tenderness which, for a short time, had the power of creating any return.”

Edmund Ferrars, however, is certainly made of sawdust. If you pricked him he would not bleed. But it must be remembered here that Jane was perfectly aware of his unsatisfactoriness as a hero, even if she did not appear to suspect that Elinor deserved a better mate. Edward, like Edmund Bertram, had wanted early to be a clergyman but had found his desires thwarted by his family, who thought the Church not “smart” enough for them and recommended the Army, which, however, poor Edward regarded as too “smart” for him.

The law was allowed to be genteel enough . . . but I had no inclination for the law . . . and at length, idleness was pronounced on the whole to be the most advantageous and honourable. I was therefore entered at Oxford, and have been properly idle ever since.

Edward's proper profession, as it was his destined rôle in the book, was to be Elinor's beloved and ultimately her husband, and certainly Willoughby, the "bad" man of this story, is more real than the hero, but that is not saying very much. The book in which they figure stands or falls by the study of Marianne and by the glimpses of the youthful Jane which steal out from Elinor and by its minor characters; and Edward, after all, it must be remembered, is the hero of a book written by a girl of twenty. She was to do better.

Darcy, the only one of Jane's heroes her detractors smile upon, and much the most attractive and successful of them, is nicely matched to the brilliant Elizabeth, and is the appropriate nephew of Lady Catherine. He is drawn as an aristocrat of insufferable pride, arrogance and selfishness, and as such he acts, until redeemed by his love for Elizabeth and the knowledge of hers for him. If we accept Elizabeth—and who does not?—we must accept Darcy.

"He had an excellent disposition—he was *taught* to be proud." In him Jane set herself the most difficult of her tasks, so far as her men were concerned; for he has to be a combination of the

likeable and intolerable, of selfish pride and disarming generosity. It was true (though he would not have said it, as he is made to do) that he had faults enough but not those of understanding, and in his "cure" Jane does contrive a degree of plausibility and reveal a sense of human psychology which must for ever remove from Darcy the charge of "puppet." It is noticeable, too, that this result is achieved not through what Jane says of him (in contrast with Wickham in *Pride and Prejudice*), but by the scenes in which he figures with Elizabeth and speaks for himself, all of which are magnificently alive.

Wickham is a different matter. It cannot be denied, I think, that he is a failure, keeping company with Mary Bennet as the out-and-out failures in a book of excellently-realised characters—a far less convincing "bad" man than Willoughby. His effrontery at the last, when he returns with the outrageous Lydia, is certainly overdone, and Elizabeth's resolve to "draw no limits in future to the impudence of an impudent man" could not keep the blush from her cheek as he inquires of her concerning his acquaintances in the neighbourhood. Willoughby had a sense of his folly if not of his sin,

but Wickham is given nothing but his easy assurance and affability. He feels nothing, neither love nor shame, not even embarrassment. From first to last he is only a smiling image pushed through the book from behind, at the sharp point of Jane's sprightly pen.

I should not call George Knightley a puppet, but he is probably rather a prig. Machinery, in the sense that he is always to see through Emma and to be the chief instrument of her correction, he has none the less a personality of his own, is equipped with common sense and a pleasantly dry humour, while behaving throughout like a human-being. And these things, it seems to me, remain true even if, with Lord Brabourne, you cannot endure him. He is human in his preconceived opinions, in his knowledge of his own sex, in his respect for Robert Martin, his tenant-farmer, in his knowledge of and patience with the match-making and self-opinionated Emma, in his capacity to see that his beloved had faults, in his desire to see her perfect, in his essential kindness and patience, even in his loud voice and hearty manner. It is Knightley who voices the true objection to the relationship between Emma and the pretty but silly Harriet Smith :

“How can Emma imagine she has anything to learn herself, while Harriet is presenting such a delightful inferiority?” He is equally convincing both as Emma’s friend and as her lover and he is most excellently contrasted with John, his lawyer-brother. I think Jane herself fell a little in love with George Knightley. It is Jane as much as Emma who looks across at him while she is dancing with Frank Churchill and is disturbed because he was not dancing, who sees that he looks so youthful, despite his thirty-seven years, and that “there was not one among the whole row of young men to be compared to him,” with his “tall, firm upright figure,” and air of gravity, broken only when she “caught his eye and forced him to smile.”

The character of Henry Tilney, another of the heroes of Jane’s early period, is drawn with that cool ironical touch beloved of the youthful feminine heart, and if he is unreal in his easy acceptance of some of Catherine’s most outrageous suppositions, he is not without reality in the gradual growth of his love for her. I can believe that Catherine fell in love with him, even if I cannot believe that he was ever a clergyman.

The truth about Jane’s drawing of men, other

than the comic characters, is that they are one-dimensional. She sees them and is interested in them from only one point-of-view, the personal—that of the friend, the lover or the husband. Men, in short, in relation to their women-folk. For that was all Jane's concern with human affairs—the personal relationship. She knew nothing of men's lives outside the domestic circle, though she had doubtless scratched at the surface of those of her sailor brothers. Perhaps it was because of this that she made so many of her men clergymen, for as a clergyman's daughter she would feel more at home with the profession. One farmer, one lawyer, two sailors.¹ All the rest are clergymen or landed proprietors. There could only be the one explanation of that.

It is interesting here to recall something which Charlotte Brontë had to say upon this inviting theme of women's heroes. Her friend, Mr. Williams, Reader to her Publishers, Smith Elder & Co., together with another member of that firm, James Taylor, had made some strictures after reading the manuscript of *Shirley*, and writing to Mr. Taylor in reply, Charlotte says :

¹ William Price, the young sailor in *Mansfield Park*, is considered by the authors of the *Family Record* to be "perhaps the only probable instance of a portrait drawn from life" in Jane's novels, p. 298.

You both complain of the want of distinctiveness and impressiveness in my heroes. Probably you are right. In delineating male character I labour under disadvantages : intuition and theory will not always adequately supply the place of observation and experience. When I write about women I am sure of my ground. In the other case, I am not so sure. . . . Each of you has laid the critical finger on a point that by its shrinking confesses its vulnerability.

This was written in the March of 1849, thirty-two years after Jane Austen's death.¹ But surely, for all our enlarged boundaries, neither Jane nor Charlotte differs here so very greatly from the serious women novelists of our own day? Men in relation to women—that is still, in 1937, as in Jane's day and in Charlotte's, how women, in fiction and outside it, tend to see men. Not in their offices, dictating letters to their stenographers, being business-like and competent and dignified, at work with other men, reaching for their hats and going out to lunch, or playing golf. Actually, even at this time of day, women know very little of their men-folks' lives : very few desire to and still fewer

¹ March 1st, 1849.

take any real interest in things outside the personal sphere—in abstract questions or world affairs ; and the personal and emotional side of life is still what, in the main, interests the bulk of women novelists.

I am neither defending nor lamenting this state of affairs but merely voicing what seems to me a fact. It must, however, be said that the personal and private relationship is as much a part of the life of a man as all that lies outside it, and in it is found more often the cause of his happiness or unhappiness, while certainly it is of more intrinsic importance and interest to women. Whether or not Jane ever justified her writing of “domestic” novels along these lines, it is a fact that the root of the matter was in her. She got her fundamentals right and what she did, nearly a hundred and forty years ago, women novelists are still, in the main, content to do.

To those who think, so oddly, that the more a woman writes like a man the better she is, this will seem the strongest point against the novels written by women—even against the novels written by Jane Austen. (But in this case they would be better advised not to read her, anyway, since Jane’s avowal of her sex was manifest in every line she

wrote). To those who think that the essential quality which women writers bring to their work, and the one enshrining its real contribution to serious fiction, is that it should be feminine, Jane's men should be acceptable—even a point in her favour. In our modern world, where the emancipation of women has meant their release too often for no more than the mere apeing of men, it is hardly remembered that freedom for women was intended to result not in a strengthening of the masculine influence in the world but a tipping of the scales towards a better adjustment of feminine and masculine.

Not the least of Jane's great qualities as a novelist is to be found in this ability to write as a woman—and particularly *of women*; and if it has resulted in pictures of men that are limited and one-sided, there are enough men writers to give us the obverse of the medallion.

Women “can't draw men!” The charge is as old as Time, and doubtless will continue to be made until Time is no more. But when we have done pulling Jane's *young* heroes to pieces, there remain, imperturbably, indestructibly whole, Mr. Bennet and Mr. Woodhouse.

Chapter Ten

HAVING GRANTED THAT JANE'S MEN are one-dimensional, that they often tend to be nicely-designed figures, marked "H. Crawford," "F. Churchill," moved about on her amusing and intricate chess board, we find ourselves faced with a new charge—that Jane, herself interested only in the domestic and trivially feminine, drew women that were likewise, their whole concern in life bounded by the business of clothes and husband-catching. For the moment we will leave the part of this charge which touches Jane herself, and merely point out that if the young woman of Jane's day didn't catch a husband she stood very little chance of securing anything else worth while,

and that Jane, being a young woman of sound sense, was perfectly well aware of it and was not likely to encourage any young woman of the day to fancy she was worth "something better," since there was so singularly little chance of her getting it. It is true that Lady Mary Montagu and Mary Wollstonecraft had already made their earnest protests against the meagre educative and other opportunities for women of their day (though Jane, most likely, had not read either), and that thirty years later Harriet Martineau and Charlotte Brontë had much to say on the same theme. Fictional women (from masculine as from feminine pens) did not encourage one to think very highly of the feminine half of humanity. Such wits as they were permitted were of the kind which Pamela possessed in such good measure, which told her, with an admirable lucidity and conciseness, that it paid to be good, but for the most part women in the best contemporary and earlier novels were romantically conceived and ridiculously faultless. The women Jane knew, although they were not in the least like her own Laura and Sophia who "fainted alternately on the sofa,"¹ as Jane hoped we should

¹ *Love and Freindship.*

gather from her youthful satire, certainly had not achieved the right (or discovered how) to shape their own lives or to develop their minds, and you might read volume upon volume from the pens of men as well as women without realising that there was a woman with intelligence alive in the length and breadth of England.

There was still a long way to go before Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* or *Shirley* made its bow in fiction: longer still before George Elliot's young women with delicately adjusted social consciences came upon the fictional scene. What more depressing spectacle in fiction is there than the sight of Mr. Thackeray's Young Ladies—how many years after Jane?—with their singing and playing, their devotion to the arts of drawing and painting, their eternal fancy work and letter-writing. Amelia Smedley, we are told, indited long epistles to twelve of her dearest friends in the yawning chasm between breakfast and luncheon, whilst her letters to George Osborne were prodigious. Becky Sharp wrote a lot of letters, too!—and nearly every girl of the period kept a diary. With all her genius, I doubt if Jane Austen ever dreamed of a day—less than thirty years after her death, and five before Angelina

Bloomer burst upon an astonished world—when a woman,¹ declaring that agriculture was the most suitable occupation for women, went out and bought a farm and worked on it in man's attire ! The idea of a paper like Mrs. Bloomer's periodical, *The Lily*, advocating women's rights and a rational costume, was miles away from any conception Jane could possibly have had of woman's existence, and so must have been the heroines of Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley*, in which Caroline Helston wanted to be an accountant. "Don't you wish you had a profession—a trade ?" she asks Shirley, to receive the emphatic reply, "I wish it fifty times a day. As it is, I often wonder what I came into the world for. I long to have something absorbing and compulsory to fill my head and hands and to occupy my thoughts."

But by this time other factors, unknown or unrealised in Jane's day, had begun to influence the position of women. They were "redundant," to use the word of the contemporary reports on the subject (so little less offensive than our modern "superfluous !") The Napoleonic wars had taken heavy toll of the masculine half of the race : the demands of Empire and the lure of emigration to

¹ Hélène Weber.

our newly-acquired Colonies were responsible for the loss of a certain proportion of manhood in England, and of that remaining a surprising proportion had already discovered the delights of bachelordom. Moreover, trade had suffered, as usual, after the artificial inflation of post-war days. Some part of the decline, too, was the result of the loss of our American Colonies, and already competition held its pistol at the throat of England's commercial supremacy and security. There was every reason why, by the time *Shirley* was published, young women should have begun to wonder what was going to happen to them.

But in Jane's day the unrest which followed upon the Napoleonic wars and did not even begin to subside until the passing of the Reform Bill in 1832, had scarcely begun to make itself felt. If she had no prophetic dreams of woman's ultimate struggles towards a place of her own in the scheme of things, and if she accepted the limitations of feminine existence, she is, in her quiet way, as critical of the results as was Charlotte thirty years later, but, one suspects, with this difference. Charlotte did most passionately desire a better life for women, as Florence Nightingale desired it ;

whereas Jane, maybe from temperament but partly, certainly, because from her must be subtracted those thirty odd years of social development and unrest, was content to make their limitations and vanities the butt of her delicate irony. But she knew what happened to the woman suspected of brains. "Woman, especially," she says, in the youthful *Northanger Abbey*, "if she have the misfortune of knowing anything should conceal it as well as she can." Here she joins hands with Mary Wollstonecraft and with Lady Mary Montagu who, in her letters to her daughter, after extolling the possession of knowledge as the true giver of contentment, cautions her against its revelation, as the parade of it can only call upon herself the envy and hatred of all the "he and she fools" of her acquaintance. In *Northanger Abbey* again (that bright mirror of the youthful Jane!) we are told that "Catherine did not know her advantages" (she means in the matrimonial stakes) "in possessing good looks, an affectionate heart and a very ignorant mind," and ironically observes elsewhere that "imbecility in females is a great enhancement of their personal charms."

Silly and trivially feminine women Jane did

draw. Mrs. Bennet and Mrs. Norris are essentially stupid, and so, among her young girls, are the Bertram sisters, Lucy Steele, who was also an essential "cat," and Harriet Smith—quite the silliest of all Jane's young women, but luckily not destined "to be an heroine." Mr. Bennet, we know, thought all his daughters "silly," but we also know that Jane did not mean us to agree with him. There is no doubt that when Jane drew a really stupid girl she gave us no chance to miss her intention, and that she considered the standards of feminine upbringing in her day left much to be desired, and to be responsible for the Julias, Marias, and Harriets she saw all around her, is clear. In *Mansfield Park* she sharply satirises the contemporary idea of what a girl needed most to be taught. When the Bertram girls discovered that Fanny could only "read, work, and write," but could not "put the map of Europe together," nor knew "the principal rivers in Russia," nor "the difference between water-colours and crayons," they thought her "prodigiously stupid." Worse, Fanny announced that she did not want to learn "either music or drawing." That, to them, was "odd and stupid," and encouraged by their aunt's agreement

they went back, well-satisfied, to their duets and cramming of facts. "Is it not very wonderful," asks Jane, "that with all their promising talents and early information, they should be deficient in the less common acquirements of self-knowledge, generosity, and humility?" Jane, in short, though she might *draw* them (and why, in heaven's name, *not*?) was very far from accepting the trivially feminine young women she saw all around her, but she veiled her dislike in irony (so delicate that it has been frequently missed altogether) instead of declaiming against them as did Charlotte, or appealing to fathers to "look at their poor girls . . . degenerating into sour old maids—envious, backbiting, wretched, because life is a desert to them, or what is worse, reduced to strive by scarce modest coquetry and debasing artifice, to gain that position and consideration by marriage, which to celibacy is denied."¹ But it is worth noticing that when Elizabeth Bennet appeals to her father to restrain the irresponsible and shameless Lydia, she says, "If you, my dear father, will not take the trouble of checking her exuberant spirits, and of teaching her that her present pursuits are not to be the business of her life, she will soon be beyond the

¹ *Shirley*.

reach of amendment . . . without any attraction beyond youth and a tolerable person ; and, from the ignorance and emptiness of her mind, wholly unable to ward off any portion of that universal contempt which her rage for admiration will excite. Vain, ignorant, idle, and absolutely uncontrolled ! Oh, my dear father ! ”¹

It made Charlotte passionately angry to see what Victorian standards made of women’s lives, but Jane, essentially a comedian, looked on the results of standards as poor in her own day as in Charlotte’s, and cloaked her objections with her oblique amusement. Jane, even if she never saw with Charlotte’s Shirley that vision on Stillboro’ moor of Titan womanhood (and how it would have amused Jane if she had !), saw a considerable way farther, where women were concerned, than did her contemporaries. Even though she accepted marriage as the natural destiny of woman and had the audacity and shamelessness to make her eager for it, she could view spinsterhood with equanimity and common sense. It is Jane, quite as much as Emma Woodhouse, who says, “ I have none of the usual inducements of women to marry.” (These ob-

¹ *Pride and Prejudice*, Chapter 41.

viously were the need of a home and a good income—since Emma was comfortably off.) “Were I to fall in love, indeed, it would be a very different thing—and without love I am sure I should be a fool to change such a situation as mine.” And when Harriet tells Emma that she will be “an old maid, like Miss Bates,” she laughs and says, “Never mind, I shall not be a *poor* old maid, and it is poverty which makes celibacy contemptible to a generous public. . . . A single woman of good fortune is always respectable and may be as sensible and pleasant as anybody else.”

Jane has been charged with approval of the mercenary marriage without love and it is true that such marriages are to be found in her novels. Charlotte Lucas, after her kindness in securing Elizabeth “from any return of Mr. Collins’s attentions by engaging them towards herself,”¹ accepted him “solely from the pure and disinterested desire of an establishment,”² and Marianne Dashwood, “born to overcome an affection formed so late in life as at seventeen,” voluntarily gave her hand to another “with no sentiment superior to strong esteem and timely friendship.”³ In *The Watsons* a conversation

¹ *Pride and Prejudice*, Chapter 22.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Sense and Sensibility*, Chapter 50.

between the two sisters is significant. One says, "I would rather be a teacher at school (and I can think of nothing worse) than marry a man I did not like," to which the other replies, "I would rather do anything than be teacher at a school. I have *been* at school and know what a life they lead; *you* never have. I should not like marrying a disagreeable man any more than yourself; but I don't think there *are* many very disagreeable men; I think I could like any good humoured man with a comfortable income."

Was this cynicism on Jane's part, or common sense? It is sheer hypocrisy, surely, to pretend that it is anything but the latter. Marriage, as Charlotte Lucas admitted, speaking for her sex in her own day, "had always been her object; it was the only honourable provision for well-educated young women of small fortune, and however uncertain of giving happiness, must be their pleasantest preservative from want." Marriage was a business, and its alternative was the one dull job open to women and at which few of them were qualified to do well. And even so it meant a species of social ostracism. In *Emma* the horrid truth about Jane Fairfax's occupation cannot, by a

lady, be sufficiently delicately referred to. Emma asks of her friend, Mrs. Weston,

“You know Miss Fairfax’s situation in life, I conclude—what she is destined to be?”

“Yes,”—rather hesitatingly—“I believe I do.”

“You get upon delicate subjects, Emma. . . . Mr. Frank Churchill hardly knows what to say when you speak of Miss Fairfax’s situation in life.”¹

Jane, with her keen observation, her sharp mind, must have realised that not all the women (to say nothing of the men) she saw about her were likely to inspire love in the breast of any member of the opposite sex, and it must have seemed plain common sense to allow them to make sensible unromantic marriages, based upon a belief that, at any rate, it was the best life had to offer women. Neither was it lost upon Jane that such marriages frequently turned out quite well. We are told that that of Charlotte and Mr. Collins did. Maybe she knew, as she knew so much else, that love did not always make people easy to live with, and I think she would have agreed with Stevenson when he said that the world was full of “anæmic and tailorish persons” to imagine whom in a love affair was absurd.²

¹ Chapter 24.

² *Virginibus Puerisque*. III. *On Falling in Love*.

Jane's heroines however were, generally speaking, another matter. *They* had to fall in love and find their happiness not alone in marriage but in the *best kind* of marriage: Jane considered that every woman had a "right to marry for love once in her life," and she quite properly extends that right to her heroines. But even in love are they not more sensible than any other young women in any novels of Jane's own or any preceding day? What young woman, before Elizabeth Bennet, thought more of her beloved's intelligence than of his good looks? And Emma, on the eve of her marriage with George Knightley, dwells upon "their mutual good," their companionship and partnership, instead of indulging in romantic transports. Jane, as we know, definitely regarded marriage as an Improver, and especially, I think, of women, in the sense of developing and educating them, and who shall say she was wrong? Woman, unless she choose very badly, can hardly fail to reap some good from marriage.

It seems absurd, in a society where women's interests were so strictly limited, to cavil at the fact that Jane's heroines are concerned with the commonplace things of life—the same kind of things

(always excepting the novels) that made up the warp if not the woof of Jane's own existence—the social calls, visits, fashions, the latest library books, the local "assemblies," the young men with whom they dance, whom they could not choose but consider as prospective husbands. Yet of the feminine preoccupation with clothes, it is Jane who says, "Dress is at all times a frivolous distinction. Woman is fine for herself alone. No man will admire her the more, no woman will like her the better for it."¹ And at twenty-two she is already feeling that irritation that the busy woman invariably feels at the need to go shopping. "I cannot determine," she writes to Cassandra, "what to do about my new gown. I wish such things were to be bought ready-made!"² But if all the love-affairs of Jane's heroines are conducted with a nice decorum, if we except her three "bad" women, let us not forget that Marianne Dashwood committed the impropriety of writing to Willoughby because she felt herself to be "as solemnly engaged to him as if the strictest legal covenant" had bound them—yet he had never told her he loved her. ("It was every day implied, but

¹ A very youthful Jane—in *Northanger Abbey*, Chapter 10.

² December 24th, 1798.

never professedly declared.”) Or that Catherine Morland acknowledged that she loved Tilney before he had declared himself to her. “His gratified looks on being told that her stay was determined, were . . . sweet proofs of her importance to him. . . . She did, almost always, believe that Henry loved her . . .”

Both these Georgian ladies broke the unwritten law—if not into quite such small pieces as Jane Eyre when she so brazenly told Mr. Rochester that she loved him, at least some thirty years earlier !

The truth is that Jane’s heroines are as far removed from those of Richardson, Fielding, and Fanny Burney as from the wraiths of Mrs. Radcliffe. Nobody like Elizabeth Bennet had appeared before upon the fictional scene. Essentially intelligent, quick-witted and clever, she was also no plaster-saint, no typical faultless heroine. She had many faults and she made mistakes. Her head rather than her heart was in the saddle (which alone would have made her conspicuous in heroines) and the shattering surprise of her appearance may be judged from Miss Mitford’s pronouncement that only “entire want of taste . . . could produce so pert, so worldly a heroine.”

Chapter Eleven

THERE IS, HOWEVER, ONE OTHER aspect from which Jane's heroines must be briefly regarded. It must be admitted that the fire in which they are tried is not very hot. Even in Jane's "middle-class Paradise"¹ the human heart must have been at times a little more unruly than the history of these young women would encourage us to believe.

Maria and Julia Bertram, with Lydia Bennet, are the only ones who fall into serious error, and from it Jane averts her face as speedily as may be, bringing Lydia back respectably married, if brazen-faced, with her precious Wickham, and blaming Julia's

¹ *The Function of the Novel*, by Philip Henderson.

elopement on to the wretched Maria, whom she abandons out of hand to the tender mercies of the aunt who had spoiled her and ruined her character. "Shut up together with little society," says Jane, "on one side no affection, on the other no judgment, it may be reasonably supposed that their tempers became their mutual punishment."¹ It is perhaps significant that Jane should use the same phrase about Maria before her separation from Crawford; this view of what constituted the real punishment of the wrong-doer was evidently the expression of a fundamental belief of Jane's, and may be taken as a foreshadowing of that conscience to be developed in future heroines by such a writer as George Eliot.

It is impossible to imagine any of Jane's characters in such a position as faced the heroine of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, and indeed, could Jane have read that work it is highly probable she would have traced certain elements of its plot straight back to that Gothic school which in her youth she had enjoyed and laughed at, and which in her later years she does not seem entirely to have given up.² The

¹ *Mansfield Park*, Chapter 48.

² In February, 1807, she has been reading *Clarentine*, by Sarah Burney, and is "surprised to find how foolish it is." I remember

most exciting thing that ever happens to any of Jane's heroines—if we except those which happened to Catherine Morland in her imagination—was the fall of Louisa Musgrove from the Cobb at Lyme, and that merely serves to show how alien such incidents were to her genius, which was entirely

liking it much less on a second reading than at the first and it does not bear a third at all. It is full of unnatural conduct and forced difficulties, without striking merit of any kind.

Two years later, we find her writing, "We are now in *Margiana*, and like it very well indeed. We are just going to set off for Northumberland to be shut up in Widdrington Tower, where there must be two or three sets of victims already immured under a very fine villain." (*Margiana*, or *Widdrington Tower*, by Mrs. S. Sykes, was published in five vols. in 1808.)

In April, 1811, she is trying to get hold of *Self-Control*, by Mary Brunton, "but in vain." In October, 1813, however, she is writing, "I am looking over 'Self-Control' again, and my opinion is confirmed of its being an excellently-meant, elegantly-written work, without anything of nature or probability in it. I declare I do not know whether Laura's passage down the American river is not the most natural, possible, everyday thing she ever does," and in November or December, 1814, she is mockingly announcing her intention of writing "a close Imitation" of it. She says, "My Heroine shall not merely be wafted down an American river in a boat by herself, she shall cross the Atlantic in the same way, and never stop till she reaches Gravesent."

On March 2nd, 1814, we find her writing: "I finished *The Heroine* last night and was very much amused by it. I wonder James did not like it better. It diverted me exceedingly." (*The Heroine*, by E. S. Barrett, was a satire on Mrs. Radcliffe, and a second edition appeared in 1814).

We have also noticed (Chapter Six, page 94) that in January, 1807, she had re-read the *Female Quixotte* by Charlotte Lennox.

for the comedy of manners and had nothing whatever to do with violence or "thrills." There were no mad wives shut up in isolated wings of any of Jane's country houses : Mansfield Park, Pemberley, Hartfield, Uppercross, all are free of husbands tied by law and roving at heart. With those three exceptions—Maria and Julia Bertram and Lydia Bennet—scenes of temptation are removed from the experience of Jane's young women, and even with them such scenes are played "off." Her lovers suffer no violent emotions ; they are strangers to physical appetites and frustrations, their problems arise from defects of character—pride, vanity, worldliness, love of power, and all are shown as the result of faults of upbringing and consequent lack of principle. In the modern sense they have no passion. Let us admit it.

Let us admit, too, that where sexual passion was concerned, Jane was a true child of her age—not that she did not recognise its existence but that she believed it to belong to the gutter where Fielding and Smollet had consigned it. Neither Thackeray nor Dickens believed this, but both were afraid of Mrs. Grundy, and it was left to Charlotte Brontë to pick it up from the gutter and to show that it had

both place and importance in the lives of decent people.

Some of Jane's contemporaries, it is true, objected to her treatment of "the sex," following Miss Mitford in her dislike of the new independent mind and witty tongue with which she equipped Elizabeth Bennet, but Jane gave nobody any opportunity to say anything so outrageous of any book of hers as was said of *Jane Eyre*—that if it was by a woman then it must be by one who "had long forfeited the society of her own sex." Jane's frankness on the theme of marriage—or rather that of her women characters and the eager willingness with which they embraced it¹—shocked some of her contemporaries and, later, struck the flannelled mid-Victorian mind as "indelicate." But though Jane's robust common sense about marriage is everywhere to be seen when she touches the subject, that side of it of which to-day the novelist treats with so much frankness was left untouched by her. Lydia Bennet and Maria Rushworth between them exhausted not only her efforts to deal with something she did not understand, but her interest in the subject. Charlotte Brontë was right

¹ Cf. Charlotte Lucas in *Pride and Prejudice*, Chapter 22.

when she said of her, after reading *Emma*, that "the passions are perfectly unknown to her; she rejects even a speaking acquaintance with the stormy sisterhood. She ruffles her reader by nothing vehement, disturbs him by nothing profound. . . . If this be heresy, I cannot help it."¹

But it was not heresy. Charlotte was right. This gusty thing we call passion was in no circumstances for Jane, even could she possibly have believed that it was something a decent woman could know anything about. I rather fancy Charlotte's passionate scenes in *Jane Eyre*, could she have read them, would have made her laugh—certainly she would have laughed at (and perhaps parodied) Mr. Rochester and at some of the things Jane Eyre says to him, and at the author's own rhetoric. For Jane Austen had so exquisite a sense of proportion that she could never take people or herself as seriously as Charlotte Brontë did; not certainly, the creations of her own mind. Her letter to Mr. Clarke, the Librarian at Carlton House at the time of the Dedication of *Emma* to the Prince Regent, written in reply to his suggestion that she might try her hand at a serious romance that should

¹ Letter to W. S. Williams, April 12th, 1850.

deal with the Saxe-Coburg family, shows that clearly enough.

I could not sit seriously down to write a serious romance under any other motive than to save my life ; and if it were indispensable for me to keep it up and never relax into laughing at myself or at any other people, I am sure I should be hung before I had finished the first chapter. No, I must keep to my own style and go on in my own way ; and though I may never succeed again in that, I am convinced that I should totally fail in any other.

Passion is a dull fellow and Jane was not born, as was Charlotte, with " a horror of the world that had produced the average woman, this creature of minute corruptions and hypocrisies." She saw her own sex clearly enough and laughed at them, but she knew that all women were not stupid, even in an age which treated them stupidly, and proceeded to her drawing of Elizabeth, Fanny, Emma, and Anne—all excellent examples of women who, for all their limitations, were intelligent, pleasant, and often amusing human beings. They stand arrestingly elevated above and contrasted with those others in

the novels whom we love least or do not love at all.

I wish those who tell us that Jane was an "eighteenth century miss" who drew "the eighteenth century miss" would tell us which she is. Elizabeth or Lydia? Marianne or Elinor? Isabella Thorpe, Fanny Price, Emma, or Harriet Smith? She cannot well be each or all of them, for never were women more strongly differentiated.

Unlike Charlotte, Jane did not see her Eves as victims nor as prophecies and portents. The woman of the future, for Jane, could look after herself. Enough for her to draw the kind of women she saw all around her, engaged in their one adventure—the hazards of love and marriage. And I will venture a guess—that if she were alive to-day that is still the thing which would interest her. For is it not true that, for all our widening of the feminine boundaries, the adventure of love and marriage is still the only one left—to men as to women—in an age which has enthroned the machine; the only one in which the individual any longer counts?

Chapter Twelve

IT HAS BEEN SAID THAT JANE'S characters are all portraits of people with whom she came into contact. It is a statement with which every novelist is confronted sooner or later, and in this instance it is one particularly worth considering before we leave the question of Jane's stories and the people who figure in them.

To Miss Mitford's published opinion of Jane Austen as a girl we have already referred. Reporting something that had been told her by her mother, *before her marriage*, she writes: "Mamma says that she was *then* the prettiest, silliest, most affected, husband-hunting butterfly she ever remembers." The author of the *Memoir*, by a comparison of dates, is able to show conclusively that all inter-

course between Mrs. Mitford's family and the Austens came to an end in 1783 when Jane was little more than seven years old; so the criticism need not detain us. But later on, after the publication in 1813 of *Pride and Prejudice*, Miss Mitford again takes the field, quoting this time not her mother but a friend, who is "truth itself," but hardly, one would imagine, an unimpeachable witness, as Miss Mitford, somewhat belatedly, appears to realise. "After all," she says, "I don't know that I can vouch for this account . . ." and goes on to explain that the friend was the sister-in-law of the man who was bringing the lawsuit against Jane's brother Edward over his Chawton estates. One would have thought that this fact might have had the effect of deciding Miss Mitford not to publish her comment; but this was not the case. The lady is reported as asserting that the husband-hunting butterfly has

"stiffened into the most perpendicular, precise, taciturn piece of single-blessedness that ever existed, and that, until *Pride and Prejudice* showed what a precious gem was hidden in that unbending case, she was no more regarded in society than a poker or a fire screen or any other thin upright piece of wood or iron that

fills its corner in peace and quietness. The case is very different now, she is a poker, but a poker of whom everyone is afraid. It must be confessed that this silent observation from such an observer is rather formidable. Most writers are good-humoured chatterers—neither very serious nor very witty ; but nine times out of ten (at least in the few I have known) unaffected and pleasant, and quite removing by their conversation any fear that may have been excited by their works. But a wit, a delineator of character who does not talk, is terrific indeed ! ”

This criticism might be summarily dismissed as malignant gossip from an interested quarter, which it undoubtedly is, were it not for the fact that, true or false, it raises two interesting issues. Was Jane this Essential Spinster and did she use her friends and acquaintances as raw material for her books ? As both are charges brought against Jane from time to time they are both worth a brief examination.

The statement confirms what we have already learnt from Jane's own letters—that her secret as a writer was out. Writing in February,¹ just after the publication of *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane declares

¹ 1813.

that she is very sensible of "the caution observed at Steventon with regard to the possession of the book," and heartily hopes that it may be the means of saving Cassandra "from everything unpleasant." She warns her, however, that she must be prepared "for the neighbourhood being perhaps already informed of there being such a work in the World, and in the Chawton World!" Does this mean that Jane had a guilty conscience? At least one of her critics would hold that it does, since he asserts that her novels contain "hardly one portrait that is not a copy with variations of one or many of the people with whom she came into contact. The heroines, the villains, the heroes, the clergymen, the bores and shrews, all are composites of known persons. Jane knew them. Cassandra knew them. Behind her early anonymity there was something other than modesty; a delicate complex of fear and pride."¹

Well, if that is true, what luck for us that Jane lived before the present-day law of Authors' Libel, for all Jane's friends and relations would have had a lovely time getting injunctions against every novel she wrote, and we should have been shorn of

¹ *Jane Austen: Her Life and Art*, by David Rhydderch, Chapter VIII.

their delight and eternal possession. But, frankly, I don't believe it. It is much more likely that Jane had heard that talk of "pokers," and, knowing human-nature, she knew also what to expect. There is nothing that people will more willingly undertake than the finding of themselves or other people in the books of their friends and acquaintances; and Jane and her own family, reading "the only one of Egerton's¹ works of which his family are ashamed," were not above this not always amiable weakness of mankind. "There are many characters introduced, apparently to be delineated. We have not been able to recognise any of them hitherto," Jane says regretfully, "except Dr. and Mrs. Hey and Mr. Oxenden, who is not very tenderly treated."

Writing in the September² to her brother, Frank, she says, "Thank you very warmly for your kind consent to my application (that she might mention his ship in *Mansfield Park*) and the kind hint which followed it. I was previously aware of what I should be laying myself open to—but the truth is that the secret has spread so far as to be scarcely the

¹ Sir Samuel Egerton Brydges (1762–1837), author of *Arthur Fitz-Albini: a Novel* (1798), and brother of Jane's great friend, Mrs. Lefroy.

² 1813.

shadow of a secret now—and that I believe whenever the third appears, I shall not even attempt to tell lies about it.”

The suggestion contained in Miss Mitford’s friend’s remarks, however, was certainly known to Jane soon after the publication of *Mansfield Park*, for in the June following its appearance in the May, she writes to Cassandra :

“ We have called upon Miss Dusautoy and Miss Papillon and been very pretty. Miss Dusautoy has a great idea of being Fanny Price—she and her youngest sister together, who is named Fanny.”

At the time of the publication of *Emma* a Miss Herries was “ convinced that I had meant Mrs. and Miss Bates for some acquaintance of theirs—people whom I have never met.”

If Jane was amused she was also a little annoyed. Like all creative writers, she was not flattered to think that her characters, so worked upon, so deeply realised, could be mistaken for Mr. A or Mrs. B. Doubtless, since all writers worth the name go to life for their work, Jane took and transmuted through her art characteristics of an

acquaintance or relative, but I believe the people to whom Miss Mitford's friend referred were behaving as people appear always to have behaved, and still do behave over the work of any unfortunate novelist whom they happen to have met. "Of course," they say, "we *all* recognised your Aunt B, or Uncle C, and perhaps it is necessary to be a novelist to realise how infuriating this arch knowingness can be, when applied to fictional characters upon which so much hard work has been spent. Knowing nothing of the way a novel is conceived or written, it seems to give people a curious kind of pleasure to pick out "portraits" in every novel they read, as if it were a winkle and they the exploring pin.

Beyond doubt Jane "extracted copy" from her neighbours, since that is only another way of saying she extracted it from life. I can well believe that an acquaintance of Jane's may, for example, have suggested to her the character of Miss Bates. Reporting a visit to her, she tells Cassandra that "Miss Miles was queer as usual, and provides us with plenty to laugh it. She undertook, *in three words*, to give us the history of Mrs. Scudamore's reconciliation, and then talked on about it for

half an hour, using such odd expressions, and so foolishly minute, that I could hardly keep my countenance." But nobody who has ever written a novel would believe that that makes Miss Miles Miss Bates. If so, all might be novelists. There would be no more to do than to sit at the cross-roads with a notebook and pencil. Novel-writing, however, is not as easy as that. But what author, asks Mr. Rhydderch, will admit that his portraits are real? "Jane did not create her characters any more than Turner did his skies: both were the result of long years of patient observation." It is of no use to talk to the possessor of this type of mind: he will not be convinced, and he has, in any case, a completely wrong conception of the creation of characters as of art and its object. If you say, "I invent," he will smile and say, "*What* do you invent?" For this critic it is all extremely simple. Jane had met all her characters in the flesh, and was clever enough to get them amusingly on to paper. It is too easy—and it reduces Jane's genius to something little distinguishable from clever photography. Only, novels—at least, not good ones, not Jane's—are not written that way at all. That Jane pondered her characters, that for her they were

inextricably part of the narrative, that in a sense they were from the beginning characters in search of an author, is quite obvious from the way Jane wrote of her heroines. She did not, she says, expect anybody but herself to "like Emma much," Anne Elliot was "almost too good" for her; and she cannot see how she is going to endure the people who do not like Elizabeth.

Mr. Rydderch asserts that Jane "peeped through the casements of her slender world and gave us vignettes," an opinion apparently based upon Jane's own statement that "She looked out for a sentiment, an illustration, or a metaphor in every corner of the room." But Jane did not quite say this of herself—and did not say it seriously nor record a fact. She is writing to Cassandra, who is at Godmersham, and who seems to have made mention of the pleasure their niece, Fanny Knight, has received from reading something of Jane's. A letter?—or the manuscript of *Sense and Sensibility* or *Pride and Prejudice*?¹ It is January, 1809, and not a line of Jane's has appeared as yet in print, but two months later she is still attempting to

¹ It was two years before Fanny was reading, and commenting to Jane upon *Pride and Prejudice*.

secure publication of *Susan* (*Northanger Abbey*). Jane says, obviously in familiarly playful mood:

“I am gratified by her having pleasure in what I write—but I wish the knowledge of my being exposed to her discerning criticism, may not hurt my style, by inducing too great a solicitude. I begin already to weigh my words and sentences more than I did, and am looking about for a sentiment, an illustration or a metaphor in every corner of the room. Could my ideas flow as fast as the rain in the store closet it would be charming.”

It is quite true that the less pleasing characteristics of Mary, her brother James's wife, are fairly frankly dealt with in the Letters. She was judged to be in the main “*not* a liberal-minded woman”; she objected to her husband's too frequent visits to the parsonage; she did not, as a young married woman, dispose Jane to lying-in, so poor a showing did she make to her sharp young eyes after a confinement; she “had little pleasure from any book.” In the intimacy of their letters the sisters doubtless exchanged the usual frank opinions of members of the family circle, and some of the

things about her sister-in-law which amused or irritated her did probably find their way into certain of Jane's characters. Perhaps Mrs. James's way with eleven hundred a year did suggest to her mind a way for Mrs. John Dashwood with much more—but that, surely, does not mean that that lady is only a portrait of Mrs. James? In Jane's last illness, it was Mary who lent the carriage which took her to her Winchester, and Mary again who travelled by coach to help act as nurse with Cassandra, and at the end Jane had a smile and a good word for her. "You have always been a kind sister to me, Mary."

Aunt Perrot, again, it is clear from occasional passages in the Letters, was sometimes a source of family irritation. But perhaps it seemed to Jane, as it seems to us, that Aunt Perrot had some excuse, for that little affair in the August of 1799 over a piece of lace (so amusingly, in the language of the day, called *Grand Larceny*), for which, less amusingly, she might have been hanged or transported, would be enough to sour anybody's disposition. But Jane's references to her aunt's idiosyncrasies are on the whole kind enough. The little matter of Uncle Perrot's will cannot really be

laid to her charge, nor the fact that she lived to be ninety-two and so dished two at least of the legatees who must survive her to benefit. Recording the annuity to James and Mary from the Leigh Perrots, Jane says : " Nothing can be more affectionate than my aunt's language in making the present and likewise in expressing her hope of their being much more together in future than, to her great regret, they have of late years been.

Except that it seems always to amuse people who do not write novels to draw parallels between characters and real persons there seems no reason to suppose that Aunt Perrot any more than Mrs. James, or both together, as Mr. Rhydderch insists, sat for the portraits of the detestable Mrs. Norris. Most of the efforts made to pin definite labels on to Jane's characters seem to me equally far-fetched. What we need to remember about character-drawing in fiction is what Chesterton said about it : " A work of fiction often consists in combining a pair of whiskers seen in one street with a crime in another." I do not believe for a single moment that though Chawton or Steventon or Bath was Jane's backcloth, the players against it were her acquaintances. Like all other really creative writers

she went to life for material, but it wasn't a camera she held up to it.

The charge of ill nature also falls to the ground completely when it is attempted to sustain it by this kindred charge that Jane's characters (by which her critics mean her unpleasant or more foolish ones—the pleasant likeable ones she is allowed to have thought of for herself) were only portraits of relatives, acquaintances, and friends. It has a better chance of standing erect when the letters to Cassandra are put in the box against her.

The personalia of the Letters is frequently unkind, even cruel (though never, I am sure, in intent), sometimes feline and occasionally cynical, but they were written to somebody who knew her well—are clothed with a kind of privileged intimacy, and the last thing Jane expected was that anybody but Cassandra would ever read them. The mystery is that Cassandra, who destroyed so much—so many letters which, as I believe, contain a Jane at which we can now only guess because she considered them too intimate for preservation—should have allowed those so likely to be misunderstood or misinterpreted to remain. "Miss Blackford is agreeable enough. I do not want people to be very

agreeable, as it saves me the trouble of liking them a great deal." "I am quite pleased with Martha and Mrs. Lefroy for wanting the pattern of our caps, but I am not so well pleased with your giving it to them." That was the frank Jane who said, or at least wrote, what other people thought, and it was the same Jane who remarked that "Mrs. Portman is not much admired in Dorsetshire. The good-natured world, as usual, extolled her beauty so highly that all the neighbourhood have had the pleasure of being disappointed." "Mrs. Bertie lives in the Paragon and was out when we returned her visit. Those are *her* two virtues." "Charles Powlett (he who had tried to kiss Jane in 1796 !) gave a dance on Thursday, to the great disturbance of all his neighbours, who, you know, take a lively interest in the state of his finances, and live in hopes of his being soon ruined."

All these quips, written in her youth, are surely but the natural outlet for her youthful high spirits. "For what?" asks Mr. Bennet of Elizabeth, "do we live, but to make sport of our neighbours, and laugh at them in return?" It was a philosophy to which Jane, quite as much as Elizabeth, assented.

Her frank, observant gaze was certainly turned to

some effect upon the people she met. She goes to see Mary, her brother James's wife, after the birth of her child and instead of indulging in raptures over the new arrival (though she records those of other people) she looks with a fastidious eye upon his mother. "Mary does not manage matters in such a way as to make me want to lay in myself," she reports the next day to Cassandra. "She is not tidy enough in her appearance, she has no dressing-gown to sit up in . . . and things are not in that comfort and style about her which are necessary to make such a situation an enviable one." What was to be done with a young woman of such perspicacity and devastating honesty? It was early December, 1798, so Jane was not quite twenty-three, but already she had written *First (False) Impressions*, *Elinor and Marianne*, and at least part of a third novel, and more than a year earlier, through her father, had actually offered a manuscript to a publisher!

Even to the balls which she so much enjoyed her devil went with her. "Miss Iremonger did not look well and Mrs. Blount was the only one much admired," who, however, appeared as "she did in September, with the same broad face, diamond bandeau, white shoes, pink husband, and fat neck."

Two Miss Coxes were present and in one of them Jane traced "the remains of the vulgar, broad-featured girl who danced at Enham eight years ago." She looked at Sir Thomas Champneys "and thought of poor Rosalie": at his daughter and thought "her a queer animal with a white neck." Mrs. Warren she was "constrained to think a very fine young woman," which she much regretted. "She danced away with great activity." Her husband is "ugly enough"; the Miss Maitlands were "prettyish," but had "a good deal of nose." The General had the gout and Mrs. Maitland the jaundice. To three young women in black, but without any statues, "she was as civil as circumstances would allow."

Jane on the social occasion is, at least to me, always a delight, whatever her devil prompts her to say. She has an immense capacity for hitting off a scene. What could be better than this? "Mrs. Bramston talked a good deal of nonsense, which Mr. Bramston and Mr. Clark seemed almost equally to enjoy. There was a whist and a casino table, and six outsiders. Rice and Lucy made love, Mat. Robinson fell asleep, James and Augusta alternately read Dr. Finnis's pamphlet on the cow-

pox and I bestowed my company by turns on all."

Jane, writing to her sister, is frequently incorrigible. What did Cassandra say in reply? I wish we had some of her letters. We know from Jane's replies that sometimes she has to thank her for "her scrap" and sometimes for something "long and very agreeable." Only—*what* did she say? Did she reprove Jane for her gossip and wicked comment? I don't think so—she must have been used to it, probably enjoyed it, and knew just exactly what value to put upon her "most unkindest" cuts.

When Jane wrote, at twenty-two, "Mrs. Hall, of Sherborne, was brought to bed yesterday of a dead child, some weeks before she expected, owing to a fright. I suppose she happened, unawares, to look at her husband"; or when she went to Deane and found her sister-in-law "plagued with rheumatism which she would be very glad to get rid of, and still more glad to be rid of her child, of whom she is heartily tired. . . . I believe I never told you that Mrs. Coulthard and Anne, late of Manydown, are both dead in childbirth. We have not regaled Mary with this news," did Cassandra realise that the

youthful Jane could not bear to look at any tragedy in life without saluting it with a humorous gesture? She would not admit tragedy's existence unless its hooded figure crossed her own threshold.

Much the same mood lives on in Jane in later years. "Only think," she says, "of Mrs. Holder's being dead! Poor woman, she has done the only thing in the world she could possibly do to make one cease to abuse her," and her comment on a Mrs. Stent is equally characteristic. "Poor Mrs. Stent! It has been her lot to be always in the way: but we must be merciful, for perhaps in time we may come to be Mrs. Stents ourselves, unequal to anything, and unwelcome to everybody!"

It is impossible not to enjoy Jane's comments upon her circle of acquaintances. Not only because they are so human but because they are so frank and yet so tipped with laughter, with that absurdity which tells us she is laughing as much at herself as at her subject. Open the Letters at random and these things jump out at you,

Mrs. Powlett is discovered to be everything that the neighbourhood could wish her—silly and cross as well as extravagant.

And of the same lady a little later,

Mrs. Powlett was at once nakedly and expensively dressed. We have had the satisfaction of estimating her lace and muslins : she said too little to afford us much other amusement.

The neighbourhood have quite recovered from the death of Mrs. Rider : so much so that I think they are rejoiced at it now : her things were so very dear.

The death of Mrs. W. K. we had seen. I had no idea that anybody liked her, and therefore felt nothing for any survivor. I am now sorry for her husband and think he should marry Miss Sharpe.

Her inability to state a dull fact dully is perpetually obvious.

Mrs. John Lyford is so much pleased with the state of widowhood as to be going to put in for being a widow again. She is to marry a Mr. Fendall, a banker in Gloucester, a man of very good fortune, but considerably older than herself.

Dr. Gardiner was married yesterday to Mrs. Percy and her three daughters.

There is to be a ball at Basingstoke next Thursday. Our Assemblies have frequently declined ever since we laid down the carriage,

so that inconvenience and disinclination to go have kept pace together.

When Jane was in London she was taken to the Exhibition of Sir Joshua Reynolds's pictures then to be seen in Pall Mall. She says,

I had great amusement among the pictures ; and the driving about, the carriage being open, was very pleasant. I liked my solitary elegance very much, and was ready to laugh all the time at my being where I was. I could not but feel that I had naturally small right to be parading about London in a barouche.

Two years earlier, when staying in town, she had been taken to the Liverpool Museum and the British Gallery, where she tells us she " had some amusement at each, though my preference for men and women always inclines me to attend more to the company than the sight." It was this deep interest in men and women that made her a novelist—but it probably did not make her a very good tame social animal. Writing from Sloane Street in 1813 she tells Cassandra that she is frightened of meeting somebody who wanted to meet her. She probably was. Jane was shy—and shyness was out

of fashion, like the Sweating Sickness. ("What's become of all the shyness in the world?" she asks, aware that the world was changing. "Moral as well as natural diseases disappear in the progress of time.") "If I *am* a wild beast, I cannot help it. It is not my own fault." Did Cassandra remember that as long ago as 1798 Jane, at twenty-three, had said she did not want people to be very agreeable as it saved her the trouble of liking them a great deal"; or from Bath (in 1801) that she could "no longer, anyhow, continue to find people agreeable." Of interest, yes, of gigantic and everlasting interest, food for laughter and amusement, but not agreeable. There were not, in short, many people Jane wanted to know.

That, probably, was what Miss Mitford and her malevolent friend resented. Jane had a reputation for cleverness and the fact that she did not make new acquaintances, that she found it easier to sit still and observe than to talk, made them uncomfortable. But Jane was no hypocrite. She did not know how to pretend. Being agreeable—too agreeable to too many people—bored her. She found it "uphill work to be talking to those one knows so little." From early years, she had had an

awareness of humanity that was an essential part of her genius. It made her too conscious—of other people, of herself—for perfect social intercourse. People knew her for a clever witty woman (they probably said “sarcastic”) and the knowledge made them feel vulnerable. Besides, clever women were still not approved and writing not quite decent. For a woman it was all a little like disrobing in public—a form of exhibitionism. Jane stood back, reserved but keen-eyed, her enjoyment of the social round oblique, two-edged, happy really only in the family circle, in the company of those who knew and understood her; at her desk, “talking as fast as she possibly could” to Cassandra (she has discovered that the art of letter writing is to write as you would speak) or to Fanny or any other of her nieces; to Charles and Frank and, surely, particularly to Henry?—and in writing the novels. “By the time you receive this (she writes to Cassandra in 1807) our guests will all be gone or going, and I shall be left to the comfortable disposal of my time . . . and probably to regret that I didn’t take more pains to please them all.” And years later she writes in the same strain of some neighbours at Chawton. “The Webbs are really

gone. When I saw the Wagons at the door, and thought of all the trouble they must have in moving, I began to reproach myself for not having liked them better—but since the Wagons have disappeared, my conscience has closed again—and I am excessively glad they are gone.” What could be more human and endearing than this?—except, of course, to the Webbs !

With Jane’s letters before us I don’t believe the family statement that Jane never made an unkind remark. I’m sure she often did, for Jane was a lover of truth and could not help telling it. Devoid, to some extent, of the social airs and graces which make people want nothing so much as to be well regarded, Jane allowed herself too often to say exactly what she thought. But I am sure she didn’t make so many unkind remarks as she would have liked, and she qualified a good many of them with her ironical twist, reducing the whole of humanity to the level of the criticised, or adding something which was so absurd, so strikingly in antithesis to the thought with which she started that there is nothing to do but laugh—and I am sure Jane laughed as well. Yet she did not suffer fools gladly : she had a peculiarly clear vision and was

no adept in the twin arts of self-deception and window dressing. The *exact* comment arrayed in *exact* phrasing was as natural to her as breathing, but that she was essentially unkind, in the sense of being malicious or ill-dispositioned, of that I can find no trace in her letters. But that fondness of hers for antithesis has stood her in ill stead down the years, for much of her apparent heartlessness arises from that sense of the absurd which made her so frequently place the incongruous side by side, as in the comment about the death of Mrs. Rider to whose demise people became quickly resigned because "her things were so very dear."

But the unkindness, the sting, of her social comments (made, let us remember, to a privileged ear) is negatived by Jane's sympathy with youth. Had she been the starched and sharp-tongued spinster, the unyielding poker her detractors allege, would she have made some of the comments she did about the very young among her acquaintances? "Miss —— looked very handsome, but I prefer her little smiling sister Julia," and her approval of the young Harriet Bridges, of seventeen, whose conduct she considered so much more "rational" than that of her three elder sisters, "who had so

little of that kind of youth," has nothing of the spinster about it. Jane's conduct, moreover, towards her young nieces is impeccable. To Anna and Fanny, who began by writing novels, she is kindness itself, allowing them to send her their manuscripts and writing them careful and generous criticisms of their efforts. All their youthful memories of her are kind and gracious ones.

"I am very far from finding your Book an evil, I assure you," she tells Anna Lefroy.¹ "I read it immediately and with great pleasure. I think you are going on very well. . . . The name of Newton-Priors is invaluable! I never met with anything superior to it. It is delightful. One could live upon the name of Newton-Priors for a twelvemonth. Indeed, I *do* think you can get on very fast. . . . I am pleased with the Dog scene, and with the whole of George and Susan's love, but am more particularly struck with your *serious* conversations, etc. They are very good throughout. St. Julian's History was quite a surprise to me. You have not known it very long yourself, I suspect, but I have no objection to make to the circumstance

¹ *Née* Anna Austen, the elder daughter of Jane's eldest brother, James.

—it is very well told. . . . Had you not better give some hint of St. Julian's early history in the beginning of the story?"

And again,

"We have been very much amused by your three books, but I have a good many criticisms to make—more than you will like . . ."

Having made them she is careful to catalogue the things she likes, and approves once again the place-name, Newton-Priors.

"Milton would have given his eyes to have thought of it."

A few weeks later she writes again, commends her for telling her husband of her work but wishes she would not plunge her hero into "a vortex of dissipation." It is not "the thing" to which she objects, but the expression—it is "such thoroughly novel slang—and so old that I dare say Adam met with it in the first novel he opened." It is in this letter that she says she is determined not to like *Waverley* if she can help it—"but I fear I must. . . . I have made up my mind to like no Novels really but Miss Edgeworth's, Yours and my own."

A charge frequently brought against Jane Austen—and one generally considered to be quite fatal to the claims of the indicted to real goodness of heart—is that she did not like children. Apart from the fact that to say you do or do not like children has about as much meaning as to say you do or do not like *en masse* anything else in the world, the evidence would all seem, so far as the Letters are concerned, to be the other way. The children of the family circle—and it was a big one—are all the special objects of Jane's affection. "Our little visitor has just left us, and left us highly pleased with her;—she is a nice, natural, open-hearted affectionate girl, with all the ready civility which one sees in the best children in the present day; so unlike anything that I was myself at her age, that I am often all astonishment and shame." "My sweet little George!" she calls the little nephew who chose the yellow wafer for his Aunt Cassandra's letter, and had a genius "as to face-making," and *didn't* throw Jane's white fan into the river. Her fond references to this small boy are numerous. She finds his "remembrances" (sent by Cassandra) very pleasing—"foolishly pleasing because I know it will be over so soon. My

attachment to him will be more durable. I shall think with tenderness and delight on his beautiful and smiling countenance and interesting manner.” In her references to her brother Charles’s young family she shows exactly where she stood in the matter of children :

“ Charlie’s little girls were with us about a month, and had so endeared themselves we were quite sorry to have them go. We have the pleasure however of hearing that they are thought very much improved at home—Harriet in health, Cassy in manners. The latter *ought* to be a very nice child—Nature has done enough for her—but method has been wanting : we thought her very much improved ourselves, but to have Papa and Mama think so too, was very essential to our contentment. She will really be a very pleasing child if they will only exert themselves a little. Harriet is a truly sweet-tempered little Darling.”

Later, upon a visit soon after the death of her mother, “ Little Harriet sat in my lap, and seemed as gentle and as affectionate as ever, and as pretty.”

In the novels, it is true, all the children are unruly, but her criticism is less of them than of

Mama and Papa with whom "Method is wanting." Jane was fond of "method" in all walks of life. In a letter recording a shopping visit to Alton with her nieces, she complains that they had much to do in the town, but not much method in doing it! Of the noisy spoilt Middleton children, when the catty and sycophantic Lucy Steele observes that she loves "to see children full of life and spirits. I cannot bear them if they are tame and quiet," Elinor Dashwood makes the appropriate and truly Jane-ish rejoinder—"I confess," she says, "that while I am at Barton Park, I never think of tame and quiet children with any abhorrence." One is not surprised to hear that this reply (to which indeed there is no answer) was followed by a short pause and that when Lucy Steele next speaks it is of Devonshire! The truth is that Jane had so finely adjusted a sense of proportion that she actually did observe that adults have to live in the world as well as children, and believed that careful and painstaking training of the young was the only way to develop manners and consideration for others as well as character and personality. Like the rest of us, Jane liked pleasing, well-behaved children, only, unlike most of us, she had the courage upon occasion to

make it known. And she disliked spoilt children because she knew the kind of objectionable human-being into which, unchecked, they must grow.

It is men, not women, who are sentimental about children, and I have often been amazed to notice how often this charge that they do not like them is brought against women-writers. It was levelled at Charlotte Brontë, of all people, of whom May Sinclair said that her feeling for children was "like the sacred awe of the lover," and who gave us what the same writer calls "that supreme image of disastrous love"—"I looked at my love; it shivered in my heart like a suffering child in a cold cradle."¹ Yet Swinburne, George Lewis, and Augustine Birrell all framed this indictment against her, but Mrs. Oliphant, who went so far otherwise astray, knew better. Charlotte loved children so much she was afraid of them. "All her life," says Miss Sinclair, "she suffered because of the perpetual insurgency of this secret, impassioned maternal energy." Jane did not possess this—neither, I think, was she in the least afraid of children. But then, neither were they afraid of her. She was on excellent terms with her numerous young nephews

¹ *The Three Brontës.*

and nieces and as they grew older Anna and Fanny became her close friends. But her utter lack of sentimentalism or hypocrisy comes out in her attitude to children as in that to all else. Jane did not just "like children," and it is doubtful if many people do. To her, children were people—with characters to form and wills to be controlled, and the mere fact that as an aunt she was a success and enjoyed the rôle did not lead her into any false position. Even here she supports sense against sensibility. Her creative sense found outlet enough in her work, and the metaphors she uses for her books are significant enough. *Pride and Prejudice* is her "own darling child," and *Sense and Sensibility* she can no more "forget than a mother can forget her suckling child." Her first charm to children, we are told, was her sweetness of manner. "She seemed to love them and they loved her in return." They were "amused by her cleverness" and there was "the delight of her playful talk. She could make everything amusing to a child." It seems a commonplace, too, to assert that her delightful sense of fun, of nonsense, must have endeared her to very young people—who love "Alice" and the ridiculous. And nobody ever

had a keener sense not alone of fun and humour but of the ridiculous than Jane. (How she would have loved Carroll !) She could not say the simplest thing without a happy turn of phrase. Thanking Anna Lefroy on her mother's behalf for a gift, she says, "Your grandmother is very much obliged to you for the turkey but cannot help grieving that you should not keep it for yourselves. Such high-mindedness is almost more than she can bear." Of a social event among their acquaintances, she writes, that she "had never seen it in the papers, and one may as well be single if the wedding is not to be in print."

Let those who believe Jane's letters "trivial" read them again, more carefully, and as a corollary to the novels. They will find, I think, not only that "the Jane who wrote the novels is in them" but also that elusive creature which it has interested and amused people for so long to attempt to discover. Perhaps I am wrong—perhaps had Cassandra not destroyed so many of the Letters it would make no difference to the portrait of the woman who lived and wrote so long ago—and lives on in what she wrote. But I don't believe I am wrong.

Chapter Thirteen

THE CHARGE OF JANE'S "DETACHMENT" as a writer from the world in which she lived is the one most frequently brought against her to-day and is probably the one that most seriously affects her reputation with the moderns. Her mind, we are told, was narrow and its interests restricted to the merely personal. She was undisturbed by poverty, it has been said; her villages swept as clean of hovels as of God. She did not mind that clergymen seldom did their duty by their parishes—she was concerned with nothing but the doings of the comfortable class to which she belonged. The inequalities and miseries of the world she saw all around her moved her not at all.

Even on the showing of the novels some at least of these charges can be easily enough refuted. The charge that Jane was indifferent to idle and self-indulgent clergymen is manifestly an absurd one to bring against the author of *Mansfield Park*, and can be disposed of readily enough by references to the chapter¹ in which Mary Crawford comments to Edmund Bertram upon her discovery of the fact that he is to be a clergyman, and that other² in which his taking of Orders is again brought up by her under cover of Maria Bertram's marriage. Certainly both Edmund and his loyal ally, Fanny, make out a good case for the despised clergyman and the views put into their mouths are clearly well in advance of the general attitude of clergymen of the day as to their duties.³ In drawing her own times the Mr. Eltons and Dr. Grants had their natural place. They might not fit into the scheme of any modern novel but they certainly fit into the pattern with which Jane is concerned. She had an uncomfortable trick of telling the truth about people, indeed it may almost be said that like

¹ Nine.

² Eleven.

³ Macaulay says that Edward Ferrars, Henry Tilney, Edmund Bertram, and Mr. Elton are four clergymen "none of whom we should be surprised to find in any parsonage in the kingdom."

Keegan in *John Bull's Other Island*, her "idea of joking was to tell the truth." Certainly, it is idle to complain that she does not vary the practice when she is dealing with the Church. Her own point-of-view is unquestionably that voiced by Edmund and Fanny. They cannot attempt to "defend Dr. Grant," Edmund says, to which Fanny replies with Jane-ish sagacity :

"No, but we need not give up his profession for all that, because whatever profession Dr. Grant had chosen, he would have taken a—not a good temper into it ; and as he must, either in the navy or army, have had a great many more people under his command than he has now, I think more would have been made unhappy by him as a sailor or soldier than as a clergyman."¹

In drawing her clergymen Jane was content to present them and to present them as what they were, country gentlemen, who did not in those days even declare their profession by any special dress. She expected us to be intelligent enough to know that if she approved, as she obviously did, of Edmund Bertram, she could not, at the same time, approve of Mr. Elton or Dr. Grant, and the incumbent of

¹ Chapter II.

Hunsford would seem to fix, once for all, the type of complacent sycophantic churchman of the period, whom she despised. There he is, transfixed on the horns of her ironical amusement, for ever

That Jane took the poverty of the world with the most a shrug of her shoulders is not a charge so easily disproved. In fact, I don't know that it can be disproved; only the shrug was one of defeat not of indifference. It is true that only occasionally do Jane's heroines go visiting the poor of the parish but Jane was a clergyman's daughter and she certainly went district-visiting herself with Cassandra, and in Cassandra's absence wrote her accounts of her "charities." I suspect that poverty dismayed Jane, as it has dismayed many others, a fact which is described in Jane-ish fashion when she says that she had no "patience" with the people at any time who were "so horridly poor and economical. Kent is the only place for happiness. Everybody is rich there." In Kent she only saw rich people, for she went to stay with her brother on his Godmersham estate. When she was middle-aged, commenting upon the affairs of a spinster acquaintance, she wrote to a niece, "Single women have a dreadful propensity for being poor, which

; a very strong argument in favour of matrimony.”
ane, in short, disliked the limitations of poverty
nd she hated it because it disturbed and worried
er.

•In the last resort, poverty for Jane, I suspect, was
he only evil. But she was no reformer. She could
ee clearly enough that many things were wrong in
he world—and indeed it would be hard to read her
work and continue to believe that she was as
atisfied with it as is generally supposed; but for the
overty and misery she saw around her she had no
remedy. She did not know what to do for the poor
eside taking them soup and warm clothing, and
ffering to provide anything they specially required
ut of her own meagre means. And it must not
e forgotten that Jane herself lived within a very
arrow income through all her short life. In 1801
he records that her father is “doing all in his
ower to increase his income, by raising his tithes,
tc.,” and when, soon afterwards, they are moving
ouse the price they are to get for the household
oods and live stock they are leaving behind them
s obviously of the utmost importance, despite the
ane-ish phraseology. “My father has got about
oo volumes to dispose of; I want James to take

them at a venture at half a guinea a volume.” “Sixty-one guineas and a half for the three cows gives one some support under the blow of only Eleven Guineas for the Tables. Eight for my Pianoforte is about what I really expected to get; I am more anxious to know the amount of my books, especially as they are said to have sold well.” We are told that when Jane’s father died his widow and daughters were in straitened circumstances, their total income “no more than two hundred and ten pounds” and that life was only made possible for them by the help of the sons of the family.¹ “I find,” says Jane, a few months after her father’s death, that “I am likely to be very poor and cannot afford more than ten shillings for Sacree,”² and her comment in a letter concerning the beneficial effect of legacies upon the recipients is given added point by the family disappointment in March, 1817, over her uncle Leigh-Perrot’s will. He left everything to his wife for her life, nothing at all to his sister, Jane’s mother, and legacies to such of her children as should survive his wife. It had been expected that Jane and her mother and sister would benefit under the will and, ill at the

¹ *Family Record*, p. 182.

² An old servant at Godmersham.

time, Jane tells us (April 6th) that "the shock brought on a relapse."

The contempt for poverty shown in her work is for the condition, not for those who suffer it, and is in itself a criticism of a state of affairs for which she saw no remedy. "Be honest and poor, by all means, but I shall not envy you. I don't much think I shall respect you. I've a much greater respect for those who are honest and rich." True, it is Mary Crawford who speaks, but it is a mistake to think that none of the people Jane disliked in her novels or meant us to dislike, ever says anything she agreed with. What Mary says here Jane was robust enough to believe and honest enough to admit—it is easier to be honest and poor than honest and rich. But it was hateful to be poor, and though she was sorry for those who were plunged into its morass, she saw that poverty had its roots in something awry in human-nature—as much "a concern of mind as of matter." If her hatred of poverty is patent, in *Mansfield Park*, for all to see, so is her belief that even in poverty character must have something to say. Of her slipshod mother she makes Fanny Price think (though, being Fanny, she might scruple to put it into words) that

she was a dawdle, a slattern, a woman whose house was the scene of mismanagement and discomfort from end to end. "Mrs. Norris," thought Fanny, who did not like her and had no reason to be grateful to her, "would have been a more respectable mother of nine children on a small income."

Virginia Woolf has said, in criticism of the work of Bennett and Galsworthy, that it makes her feel she should "join a society" or, desperately, "write a cheque." And in criticism of Mrs. Woolf, the author of *The Novel of To-day*¹ says that "she does not want to be reminded that the world does not consist entirely of Mrs. Dalloways shopping in Bond Street and giving dinner parties in Westminster." But, explaining her own state of mind, Mrs. Woolf adds that Sterne and Jane Austen do not have this effect upon her. They were "interested in things in themselves; in character in itself; in the book itself" rather than in "the fabric of things." But for many of the modern critics who shrug their shoulders at Jane, that is the whole head and front of her offending. She is interested in people, as is Mrs. Woolf, who have enough leisure in life to develop their individualities,

¹ Philip Henderson.

their souls; to be interested in books, plays, themselves. And this, we are told to-day, is all wrong. Nobody has any right to be interested in anything but social states and the "class war," and they have no right to their private lives. The creative writer who is concerned with "materially rosy conditions of society and the outlook upon life which they beget,"¹ is of no value to society at the present time. Novels should be proletarian and revolutionary, and the novel that is of worth has always wanted to "change mankind and through mankind, society." Although it might be alleged that all proletarian novels are the same novel, that is probably true; though not all revolutionary novels are so in the merely political sense. The Russian writers under Czardom certainly wanted to change society; so did Balzac, Dickens, Charlotte Brontë, Charles Reade and many more, whilst in our own day Galsworthy and Wells have hammered a few well-directed blows at the social fabric of our modern world. But to-day, it seems, something much more is required of the writer. A modern critic of contemporary literature² says that before he can "produce the best work that he

¹ *Contemporary Literature and Social Revolution*, by R. D. Charques.

² Edward Upward.

is capable of producing," a writer of to-day must "become a Socialist in his practical life," and that "unless he joins the workers' movement his writings will become increasingly false, worthless as literature. Going over to Socialism may prevent him, but failing to go over *must* prevent him from writing a good book." This seems to me perilously like nonsense. The novelist is to become not only the handmaiden of political propaganda but the mouthpiece of one brand of political faith. Yet the people in the world who distrust Socialism or Communism quite as much as they distrust Fascism, are neither all fools nor complacent accepters of what they see all around them, and it cannot be said that the new forms of political faith have, in the last resort, done anything for humanity that could not have been achieved without the loss of human liberty—which is the one quite definite result of both Communism and Fascism. Why should the novelist rashly commit himself or herself to either? The true concern of the novel is first of all with human-beings, and though what they believe is as intrinsic a part of them as the colour of their hair, the function of the novel is not alone to show forth their political beliefs, prejudice, or

aspirations. To draw real men and women and to relate them to the world in which they live is the business of the novel and not theories or political faiths of whatever colour. And in a time like the present it seems, as indeed I believe it must have seemed to Jane, that the private life of the individual becomes all the more important as the chances of the individual having any private life left at all become more hazardous.

No more than we to-day did Jane live in a world without its problems and terrors, and indeed in essentials it must have been a world very like our own, so much does history repeat itself. Though the time of railways was not yet, nor the spate of inventions which came upon the world in the Victorian era, the Luddite Riots and executions which ushered in the first machine age, took place five or six years before Jane's death and belonged to a period of great distress. The Church was almost moribund. War swept Europe; for half of Jane's lifetime England herself was at war and for many years lived under the perpetual fear of invasion. War, indeed, must have seemed to Jane a part of the very fabric of life, and the extremes of poverty and wealth were everywhere to be seen.

And Jane wrote of none of these things. She wrote of the things she knew—the people she saw all around her. Her novels are concerned with human-beings and with character. Consciously or unconsciously she chose the permanent. And that is why they have lived; that is why that remote world of her books—shorn as it is of the contemporary terrors and alarms—seems to us so like our own. Why it wears so modern an air. Though she says nothing about it, she was too intelligent to have failed to notice that the French Revolution, which was to usher in Utopia, had, in fact, ushered in only horror and an end for fifteen years of peace. But, for all that, she had not, like Wordsworth, “lost all feeling of conviction and yielded up all moral questions in despair.” Did she know—she who is said to have “taken no interest in politics” and to have imbibed the mild Toryism of her family—that men and women live not by political faiths and social creeds but by the human heart, that a regenerated world was to be achieved not by Act of Parliament but by a change of heart? Or had nobody ever told her that in a writer, a hatred of the *bourgeoisie* is the beginning of virtue?

Chapter Fourteen

THE FRENCH REVOLUTION ! IT IS THE King Charles's head of all those who write of Jane Austen—even of those who most admire her. Nobody did that more than the late G. K. Chesterton, yet in his admirable essay upon *Love and Freindship* he speaks of her as content to write “ a story as domestic as a diary in the intervals of pies and puddings, without so much as looking out of the window to notice the French Revolution.” He must have forgotten, quite apart from the fact that you could not see the Revolution by looking out of the window of an English country parsonage, that Jane wrote this little masterpiece when she was seventeen—an age when even the direst world

happenings are apt to loom much less largely upon our horizon than many other far less important things going on all around us. And in this case Jane was trying her hand at what was destined to be a job of immense importance to literature. She did not know that, she never did know it, but that she wanted to write, that she had to write and that, by the very nature of her talent, she had to write of the things of which she knew, is assured. *Love and Freindship* and the rest of her early work, was of more importance to her youthful mind than anything else just then that was happening. Thirteen when the Revolution began, seventeen when Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette were executed, the death of her cousin's husband on the scaffold at the beginning of 1794, must have been the first thing which made the Revolution real to her before the defeat of Robespierre, when she was eighteen, brought its terrors to an end. In these days Jane would have been considered little more than a schoolgirl and not expected to be taking a very deep interest in world affairs. It was an accident, if something like a divine one, that she should have been writing *Love and Freindship* at so tender an age—to expect her to have enshrined in it some

recognition of the world-shattering events in France would be to demand a miracle as well.

Nevertheless, even with the French Revolution left out, there is still a case, and a very considerable one, to be brought against her by those who claim that, for all her literary excellence, they are unable to admire her over-much because she wrote of the microcosm she knew, to the total exclusion of the world of events that thundered at her door.

Consider, they say, what was happening in the world in which Jane wrote her novels. If we leave out the horrors in France during her childhood and girlhood, if we pass the years, before her twenty-first birthday, when she was engaged on *Elinor and Marianne* and *First Impressions*, it is still true that by the time she was twenty-two and already started upon the composition of *Northanger Abbey*, England was everywhere in fear of invasion and Nelson was engaging the French Fleet at the Battle of the Nile. In the year of the sale of that book to Crosby the Irish Rebellion under Emmet was exciting attention : in that following Napoleon and Josephine were crowned by the Pope in Paris, and Spain declared war against Great Britain. Trafalgar, Austerlitz, Jena, Marengo, and Hohenlinden were

all words of import, and in 1806 Napoleon declared England to be in a state of blockade. As if it would never end, the Peninsular War dragged out its weary length to the tune of Saragossa, Corunna, Badajos, and Albuera, whilst Jane attempted to get *Northanger Abbey* published, settled down again to authorship at Chawton and went to London with her brother Henry to taste the sweets of publication. Whilst Moscow burned, she was preparing *Pride and Prejudice* for the press. Whilst Napoleon was deposed and banished to Elba she was hard at work upon *Emma*, and going again to London to supervise the publication of *Mansfield Park*. Before *Emma* was finished, news of Napoleon's escape from Elba electrified the world and before it was published Waterloo had been fought and Napoleon had gone to St. Helena.

Why is it, we are asked, that no hint of these world-shattering events is to be found in any one of the novels Jane wrote whilst they were taking place? The question might be answered by another. Why should it? Barrie wrote *A Kiss for Cinderella* in 1915 and *Dear Brutus* in 1917—this did not prove that he was uninterested in the Great War any more than *The Old Lady Shows Her*

Medals proved that he was. If he had something during those momentous years to say about old ladies who lost their sons in the war, he had also something to say about the people who fail in life, look for some excuse for themselves and want another chance ; and being an artist he had to write what at the moment he *could* write. To assert that Jane's complete ignoring of the war is proof that she maintained about it a detachment so lofty that it was indifference, or indeed proof of anything save that the war from any angle was something with which she knew herself incapable of dealing, is palpably absurd. Only a fool could have regarded with disinterest a European conflict which menaced the very safety of England's shores, and we know that Jane was very far from that. Only a highly intelligent woman could have written the novels, and I submit that her detachment is more apparent than real. If her novels are empty of allusion to contemporary events of significance, that in itself is of significance—for her letters are not.

Jane Austen's letters, in my view, have been consistently underrated. The academic mind has garnered from them only a concern with the fripperies of feminine existence, has shrugged

gowned shoulders over the fact of Cassandra's winnowing and left it at that. But the fact is, surely, that though Cassandra seems to have decided that only the trivial and idly personal letters were to be read by posterity, even these contain odd sidelights upon events which do suggest, to the earnest seeker after the real Jane Austen, that had we but all the Letters in front of us her attitude to the world in which she lived would not only be made clear but would be a complete answer to the charge that she was "supremely detached" from and indifferent to, the stirring events of her own times.

With two brothers engaged in the naval services, how should she be? Her letters contain many references to their doings, which betray anxiety and relief as well as pride. In December of 1798, the year of the Nile, she writes "speedily" to the absent Cassandra to tell her that in the previous October their brother Frank was "at Cadiz, alive and well." The letter talks of a private expedition to be launched from Gibraltar against "some of the enemies' ports; Minorca or Malta were conjectured to be the objects," and it adds that they are not to be alarmed at the longer intervals which must now elapse between letters for

“communication between Cadiz and Lisbon is less frequent than formerly.”

We hear too, in the same month and year, that her brother Charles, three and a half years her junior (and Jane at that time was barely twenty-three), is to be “continued on the *Scorpion*” on account of his inexperience, but that his “wish to be in a frigate” had been mentioned to the Board of Admiralty and that “when he had served his turn in a small ship” he would be removed. His promotion was “likely to take place very soon,” and although Jane is obviously delighted with this news, it is equally obvious that her anxiety and interest in the movements of the Navy are thereby deepened. When, in 1800, Charles was home on leave, and “about two o’clock walked in on a Gosport hack,” Jane was happy. His life at sea apparently agreed with him, for she says, “he was in very good looks indeed. He walked down to Deane to dinner; he danced the whole evening, and to-day is no more tired than a gentleman should be.” We hear at this time, too, of the movements of her elder brother, Frank, who was in Larnica, in Cyprus, having come from Alexandria, knowing “nothing of his promotion.” In the next year, 1801 (May),

writing from Bath, she acknowledges another letter from him and says, "we therefore know something now of *our concerns* in distant quarters." (The italics are mine, not Jane's.) After this there is a period when both brothers are at sea, and news is hard to come by. They have to be content with news of the younger through a letter from the elder, who can make no more than "conjectures" as to his doings and whereabouts. Charles himself was becalmed on the *Endymion*, but expected to be in Portsmouth "by Monday or Tuesday," and meant to come "to Steventon once more while Steventon is ours."¹ The *Endymion* had "not been plagued with any more prizes," but later in the year we hear that Charles had received £30 for his share of the privateer, and expected "£10 more," and had spent some of it on buying presents for his sisters. The man-o'-war had "already received orders to take troops to Egypt," which Jane would not "like at all if I did not trust to Charles being removed from her somehow or other before she sails. . . . He knows nothing of his own destination."

From a letter which Jane writes to Cassandra in January, 1796, it is clear that she considered two

¹ This was the year of the removal to Bath.

brothers concerned in the European events were sufficient, for she does not smile upon a project of her favourite brother Henry's. "He is still hankering after the Regulars," she says, "and he has got a scheme in his head about getting a lieutenancy and adjutancy in the 86th, a new-raised regiment, which he fancies will be ordered to the Cape of Good Hope. I heartily hope he will, as usual, be disappointed in this scheme." When this was written the world still awaited the victory of Napoleon at Lodi, which, in the Spring of that year, was to usher him on to the European scene, which he was not to leave—and then not permanently—for another eighteen years. But the events of the previous months had included the taking of the Cape of Good Hope by the British, and it was obvious that young men of the day of an adventurous turn of mind had their eyes upon that possible seat of trouble. Even at that time, when her mind was so deeply engaged with her writing and she only just past her twentieth birthday, Jane must have been perfectly aware of the threats to the family circle and, if for that reason only, therefore, quite incapable of any feeling of "supreme detachment" from the troublous world outside it.

You may say, if you like, that Jane's interest in the war—as revealed by these extracts from her letters—was a completely personal one, centred in the fate and doings of her sailor brothers, but that, in the main, is still the attitude of men and women to all wars when actually taking place. Jane's comment on May 31st, 1811, on some battle¹ would seem, however, to show that her attitude was something else as well. "How horrible it is to have so many people killed ! And what a blessing that one cares for none of them !" This, surely, is not, as I have sometimes heard it alleged to be, a remark rooted in callousness. It may, as Lord Cecil suggests, be an expression of a robustness towards disaster, but I do not think so. I don't believe that Jane felt very "robust" about the plague of war which afflicted most of the years of her adult life. I believe that deep down she felt a horror of the slaughter which for so long had decimated one half the generation to which she belonged. Maybe people had grown accustomed to the idea of a perpetual state of war, much as we

¹ The authors of the *Family Record* suggest that it was probably Albuera, fought on May 16th, 1811, described in the Cambridge Modern History as "the most bloody incident of the Peninsular War."

to-day, in "post-war England," have got used to the various wars still being waged in the world, to the aftermath of the Italian aggression in Abyssinia, to Japan's perpetual attacks on China, to the international political factions which at the present time are making of Spain a shambles—and this despite the continued threat of our own involvement. The human mind—especially in our own day, when news of fresh horrors reaches us so rapidly and continually—arrives at a point when, if existence is to be supported and sanity preserved, it has to shut itself up against the knowledge. Jane's remark upon Albuera is far from callous. She says, as is her habit and nature, what other people merely thought. The news of so much slaughter is horrible. But how much worse, how unbearable, if it touched us more nearly. What more human? Is it not what we all felt—we whose youth fell, like Truth, as one of the first casualties in the war years—when we forced ourselves to read the Casualty Lists?

Neither is this comment upon a battle we may assume to have been Albuera an isolated one. Two years earlier, she is telling Cassandra that the *St. Albans*, then at Spithead under the command of her

brother Frank, "may soon be off to help bring home what remains of our poor army, which seems dreadfully critical." The reference is to Sir John Moore's heroic retreat from Corunna. This event seems to have made a deep impression upon Jane's mind, for she mentions it in the two succeeding letters. "This is grievous news from Spain"; then she is sorry to find Sir John Moore has a mother living and then that cry of self-protection that she was to repeat two years later, "Thank heaven! We have no one to care for particularly among the troops."

I suspect that for Jane the war did not bear thinking about. There was nothing to be done about it, yet all the time it was there, a cold horror at the back of the mind. With her sound common-sense, therefore, Jane limited her thoughts of it, as far as she could, to that point where it might affect the members of her own family. She would not let it intrude upon her creative mind. Her novels should be free of the horror which was at the back of human existence. Save for Wentworth, the sailor, not on active service, and the soldiers with whom Lydia Bennet flirted and made eyes, there are to my recollection no members of the fighting

services in any of them, but Anne, re-united to her lover at the end of *Persuasion*, is left with "nothing but another war to dim her sunshine." Jane's refusal to admit the war into her novels is deliberate, and not wholly to be explained by her sense of her own limitations as an artist—the "excuse" usually put forward by her admirers who feel it a lack in her work.

But I do not believe Jane is in any need of an excuse. There was, as far as I can see, nothing to have prevented her from introducing some hint of the war into her novels, without the need of any special knowledge of war in its immediacy. Occasional reference to it in her novels, some hint of tragedy to some of her several groups of characters, would have been sufficient to have related them all to the war-racked world in which they lived. "We do not claim," said Thackeray, looking at "Jane's war" over the gap of the years, "to rank among the military novelists. Our place is with the non-combatants." Yet he did very well over Waterloo. "Darkness came down on the field and city; and Amelia was praying for George, who was lying on his face, dead, with a bullet through his heart." It might be a sentence from Jane herself, had she

cared to admit into her stories the violent element of the war from which her day and generation were never free. "I am tired of *Lives of Nelson*," she writes to Cassandra; she will read Southey's only if her brother Frank is mentioned in it ! •

Jane could have given us war from the non-combatants' side had she wanted. The simple truth is that she didn't want. She would have none of the war in her novels. It had to be endured, but she would admit to her work nothing of its folly and waste. Even the soldiers at whom Lydia made eyes she robs of their glamour. They are less officers of His Majesty's Army than Lydia's *beaux*. Even in her country drawing-room the war must have made at times, I think, too insistent a clatter for Jane; too many of the young men whom she knew donned their uniforms and marched away to it. She remained obstinately aware that the business of life and living went on—"as if no end were to be expected and no enemy in front." She turned from war to uphold the sanities of peace, to preserve in a war-ridden world (which threatened continual danger to her own nearest and dearest) that sense of the personal and individual which then, as now, in a war-ridden world, must have

seemed the only solid thing left to men and women. The personal relationship—one's private life ! It was all that was left—the only thing of which anybody could be sure. To Jane it remained important, even with the Corsican striding Europe—perhaps even more important because of it. The business of daily life went on—and to the record of all those things which comprised it she applied herself. Individual life was the one reality—the one thing that remained vivid. However the Dictators raged, men and women still met, still fell in love . . . were still wise and silly, still petty and kind and everlastingly amusing. And Jane, who began by writing novels which should debunk the romantics and ended by writing one which was almost sentimental, was at heart a romantic. Her reticences and silences, her retirement into a world from which the scourge of the centuries had been banished are at once explained by this fact—as is also the measure of her desire to escape from a world which did not bear thinking about.

Chapter Fifteen

ARE WE THEN TO CLASS JANE AUSTEN'S novels as Escapist literature ?

I believe that we are, despite the fact that she lived and wrote long before that label was tacked on to a large, ill-defined and badly-assorted body of work. The label is already a derogatory one. To those who think that novels should be revolutionary and proletarian, who hold, with Edward Upward, that unless a writer becomes a Socialist his work must "become increasingly false, worthless as literature," it is a phrase of contempt. Yet Mr. Edwin Muir cites as the leading example of the "writer of escape" D. H. Lawrence, and puts also on his list Blake, Shelley, Wordsworth, and Keats ! "There are," he says, "two ways in which a writer may avoid being assimilated by his age ; one is by struggling with it and the other by escape. Both imply an intense apprehension of the spirit of the times."

In an interesting recent article¹ upon this subject, Margaret Culkin Banning sees in the Escapist writer "the god-driven victim of his own maladjustment and dissatisfactions," and no historian of manners or practical reformer. His desire is to be "free of the world as it is." He seeks what is for him the best means of adapting himself to the world in which he has to live. The theme is an interesting and complicated one and in the last resort little would seem to emerge from its study than what we knew before—that definitions seldom define, and that what is "escape" for one person is only for another a heightening of the prison walls. But it has long since seemed to me that Jane Austen's work postulates Mr. Muir's two things—"a vision of truth and beauty and a world which does not correspond to that vision"—which are to be taken, so to speak, as the hall-mark of the Escapist in literature.

It may be true—indeed her letter to the Librarian of Carlton House leaves us little doubt of it—that Jane Austen deliberately confined the interests of her novels because she knew her limitations as an artist, but that does not explain why she entirely banished from them every hint of the world she lived in, nor convince me that all that amazing clarity of vision of which she was possessed was turned

¹ "Who Escapes?" *Saturday Review of Literature* (New York), July 17th, 1937.

only upon the microcosm of which she chose to write. Her familiar sphere, the round of small events which, as she tells us, were to her so important, were part of that greater world which was racked by war, her circle of acquaintance doubtless thinned by the continual battles of which, from time to time, she read in her paper, yet in her work there is no sign of these things. It is absurd to suppose that anybody as clear-sighted, as intelligent as Jane Austen was uninterested in these matters which must have been upon all tongues and in which members of her own family were involved, and the only explanation that seems to me to be adequate is the one that recognises the omission as deliberate. Not only because a world of tragic events would not square with her desire to write, and her talent for, comedy, but because she could find no place in a universe of violence and misery, because to live at all she had to turn away from the thought of battle-fields and horrible deaths and concern herself with the simple ordinary things in which were housed all of sanity and common sense she knew. It was not only that she found in these things material for the legitimate exercise of her literary talent, but, too, a sense of permanency that was to be found nowhere else.

Let us not be deceived by that air of amused detachment so characteristic of her work—beneath

it there ran an emotion which, if quiet, was none the less deep. Nor by her irony and occasional cynicism—it hid a real concern for things before which she knew herself helpless. Nor, even, by that perennial humour, for I fancy that as she grew older there were occasions when she laughed only that she might not weep. Her identification with her own age, it seems to me, is most sharply outlined and defined by her very disassociation from those things which most harried it. By her insistence upon the value of the everyday she helped to establish the truth that it is peace and the arts of peace, and not war and the continual re-making of the map of the world, which make history.

And perhaps that is why, in our modern world—a world as full of social problems as ever was Jane's and of a more frightening magnitude, and racked by wars more horrible than she or her generation could ever have dreamed of—she has her place. In a society which has enthroned the machine-gun and carried it aloft even into the quiet heavens, there will always be men and women—Escapist or not, as you please—who will turn to her novels with an unending sense of relief and thankfulness.

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